



WASHINGTON HEALTH SYSTEM
Wilfred R. Cameron Wellness Center



Food Cravings: The science behind them and how to manage your cravings

Have you ever felt as if you were addicted to certain foods? You may not be so far off the mark in thinking this. More and more research shows that our brains react to certain foods very similarly to the way a drug addict would react to certain drugs.

Addictive substances stimulate a reward circuit in the brain. Rewarding experiences elicit the release of “feel good” chemicals such as dopamine in the brain. Recent research shows that the very same circuits for learning and memory are involved in addictions. What this leads to is a change in the brain cells which makes it much harder to discontinue the activity that your brain remembers is so pleasurable.

Our emotions also play a role in food cravings. You may find yourself grabbing for a “comfort food” such as potato chips because your brain associates that food with stress and recognizes the potato chips as a stress reliever. Food seems to halt the stress response. However, in the long run you are not combating the root cause of the stress and fixing the problem. You are merely covering it up with a layer of junk foods.

There are also triggers that affect food cravings. It is important to recognize what the triggers are and avoid the situation, location, place or activity that produces the craving. For example you may notice you can go all day without chocolate. Then you sit down in front of the TV at night to watch your favorite show and the craving starts to hit. One way to counteract this craving would be change the activity. Maybe you begin watching your show while sitting on a stability ball or marching in front of the TV when you feel the urge to grab for chocolate. You need to break the habit in order to stop the craving. The easiest way to do that is to change the cycle for which your body has become accustomed.

For most Americans one fourth or more of their caloric intake comes from sweets such as sweetened beverages, candy and pastries. There are also many hidden sugars we do not consider such as ketchup, pasta sauces and salad dressings. To learn more about your sugar intake try to keep track of the amount of sugar you consume on a daily basis. Begin reading labels and counting your sugar consumption. It is recommended that we should consume no more than 6-9 teaspoons of sugar each day. This comes out to be 24-36 grams total.

Ways to reduce sugar intake:

1. Consume regular meals and space meals evenly apart. Do not go more than 3-4 hours in-between meals and snacks.
2. Incorporate higher fiber/ less processed foods into your meals each day. Choose whole grains such as wheat bread, brown rice and whole wheat pasta.
3. Cut back on artificial sweeteners. Research shows that artificial sweeteners such as sucralose and aspartame may increase your cravings for sugar.

Next time you find yourself craving a certain food try out the **5 Ds**:

- **Delay**- Wait ten minutes before allowing yourself the food you crave
- **Distract**- Concentrate on something else
- **Distance**- Do not keep tempting foods on hand; keep those foods out of sight or harder to obtain. For example if you want it you would have to travel to the store and purchase it first
- **Determine**- Think about how much you really want it and if it is worth it
- **Decide**- Know how much to eat; if you choose to eat something you crave, remember to enjoy it!