

Managing Food Cravings

What Is a Food Craving?

A **CRAVING** is an intense, urgent, or abnormal desire for something. Food cravings are a normal part of living in a food-oriented society. Research suggest three areas of the brain are responsible for food cravings- the hippocampus, insula cortex, and the caudate nucleus. These areas of the brain are responsible for memory, reward, emotion and hunger. The first step in managing your food craving is to understand **WHY** you are having the food craving.

Food Craving Triggers

MOOD:

Emotions and daily stress can easily trigger food cravings. Food, specifically refined carbohydrates, is often used to comfort feelings of sadness, accentuate happiness and ease stress by releasing serotonin, a calming hormone, and dopamine, a reward and pleasure hormone, in the brain.

ENVIRONMENT:

Tempting food items such as candy, cookies, and chips kept in the house, car, or at work can lead to food cravings.

SITUATION:

Holidays (i.e. Christmas, Halloween, Thanksgiving), celebrations (i.e. birthdays, marriages, promotions, graduations) and events (i.e. sporting events, concerts, festivals) are often centered around food making it difficult to avoid food cravings.

HABIT:

Time of day, day of week, daily routine, etc. can all lead to food cravings. For example, you may crave snacks after dinner while watching TV due to habit or donuts on Fridays because they are often brought into your office on Friday mornings.

SENSES:

Catching a glimpse of your favorite food or driving by your favorite restaurant can prompt you to crave that food. In addition, simply smelling your favorite food can remind you how that food tasted or trigger a beloved memory of that food, thus leading to a food craving.

HUNGER:

Going too long between meals can lead to low blood sugars (hypoglycemia) making it more difficult to resist food cravings.

MEDICATIONS:

Opioid medications such as Suboxone or methadone can cause intense carbohydrate cravings.

Tips for Managing Food Craving Triggers

MOOD:

To combat cravings related to mood, remember the effect of food on your mood only lasts minutes during consumption of the food. Focus on how you will feel after you eat the food not during consumption. Ask yourself, will this food change my mood or situation after consuming?

ENVIRONMENT:

Do not keep tempting foods in your environment, especially during stressful times when resisting is more difficult. Stock your home, car, and office with healthy snacks such as fruit, nuts, yogurt, string cheese, etc. to help control appetite and to resist lower quality food choices.

SITUATION:

Aim to be in control of your situation by suggesting a restaurant with healthy food options or offering to bring a healthy dish to parties and events.

HABIT:

It is important to listen to your hunger and appetite cues throughout the day to identify whether you are truly hungry or are simply craving a food out of habit. Hunger is a physiological **NEED** for food while appetite is a psychological **WANT** for food. Look for hunger cues such as low energy and stomach growling.

SENSES:

If you drive by your favorite fast food restaurant or bakery daily, try finding an alternate route to avoid the temptation of stopping and eating that meal. If the smell of a food is triggering your food craving, distance yourself from the smell, light a candle or spray your favorite air freshener to help avoid giving into the craving.

HUNGER:

Consume a consistent meal pattern full of high quality foods that provide your body with the nutrients it needs to avoid drops in blood sugar and intense food cravings.

5 D's to Disarming Food Cravings in the Moment

DISTANCE:

Avoid keeping tempting items in your home, car, or office. Out of sight, out of mind- if you do not have tempting items such as sweets and salty snacks readily available, you are less likely to give in to your craving.

DELAY:

Set a rule that you will wait at least 10 minutes for a craving to pass before giving in to your craving.

DISTRACT:

While delaying, try distracting yourself by focusing on another task you enjoy and keeps your mind occupied. Some examples include going for a walk, taking a relaxing bath, calling a friend or family member, working on a puzzle, reading an interesting article, or concentrating on one of your tasks at work.

DETERMINE:

After delaying for 10-15 minutes think about how much you really want the food and decide if it is worth indulging in. Ask yourself, what will the nutrients in this food do for my body, will this food assist or deter me from reaching my goals, will I feel guilty after consuming the food, and is the food worth consuming.

DECIDE:

If you choose to have the food, decide how much of the food to eat and stick to that portion; it is often not the food that is the problem, but how much of it you choose to eat. Avoid the all or nothing mindset and realize it is ok to have the occasional small portion of your favorite treat.



ENSURE ADEQUATE SOURCES OF LEAN PROTEIN:

Lean protein also assists in reducing food cravings by increasing satiety. Incorporate lean protein sources such as low-fat milk and yogurt, nuts and nut butter, soy products, lean meat including poultry without the skin and fish, and beans and legumes with every meal to help ward off cravings.

LIMIT HIDDEN SOURCES OF SUGAR IN THE DIET:

Sugar has been shown in research to trigger reward and hunger systems in your brain causing increased cravings and overeating. In addition, sugar can cause rapid spikes and falls in blood sugar leading to hypoglycemia, which increases hunger and appetite. We are all aware of the usual sugar ridden suspects in our diet including sugary beverages (i.e. soda, juice, sweet tea) and sugary foods (i.e. cookies, candy, cake, donuts). However, there are many foods in our food supply that have hidden sources of sugar. Beware of sugar found in cold or hot breakfast cereals, condiments (i.e. ketchup, dressings, marinades), yogurts, snack bars, canned fruit, frozen foods and trail mixes. Monitor food labels for hidden sugar ingredients including barley malt, high fructose corn syrup, brown sugar, honey cane juice, maltodextrin, corn syrup, maple syrup, dextrose, molasses, fructose, powdered sugar, glucose, raw sugar, and sucrose.

CHOOSE HEALTHY SOURCES OF DIETARY FAT:

Healthy dietary fat including olive or canola oil, nuts and nut butter, seeds, and avocado can increase satiety and help you manage food cravings. Some ideas for increasing healthy fat include snacking on nuts, tossing vegetables and salads with olive oil, spreading nut butter on whole grain bread or crackers, and adding avocado to sandwiches, salads, and other dishes.

How Can Dietary Changes Decrease Cravings?

EAT A CONSISTENT MEAL PATTERN:

Avoid skipping meals, as this can cause dips in blood sugars, leading to increased hunger and appetite and making it more difficult to control food cravings.

INCREASE DIETARY FIBER:

Dietary fiber slows down digestion, which can keep you fuller and more satisfied for longer. Satiety helps reduce food cravings. Aim to incorporate more whole grains, beans and legumes, nuts, and fruits and vegetables into your diet. Try a bowl of oatmeal or high fiber cereal for breakfast, snack on fruit and/or nuts between meals, add beans to your salad or soup, and aim to make half your plate vegetables at lunch and dinner.