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Food Cravings: Strategies for those Annoying Cravings

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Summary: Food cravings are intense urges to eat certain foods, such as energy-rich carbohydrate foods, junk foods that are salty or sweet. Food cravings can pose a serious health problem, as they can lead us to eat large amounts of unhealthy foods, thus contributing to problems with weight. The good news is that there are many strategies that can be done to help deal with food cravings.

What are Food Cravings?

Human beings need to eat in order to live, and as a result, our body signals through cravings and urges that we need to eat. For most of human history, humans spent most of their days moving outside, and would expend large amounts of energy in hunting and gathering. Our traditional diet was high in natural grains, vegetables, fruits and lower amounts of meat.
Food cravings helped hunter gatherers survive:

- Cravings for sweet foods were a signal that a ripe fruit was ready to be eaten;
- Cravings for salty foods helped ensure we had enough salt in our diet; for most of human history, salt was extremely hard to find and thus extremely valuable and sought after.
- Cravings for fatty or carb rich foods helped ensure we got enough calories. Hunting and gathering requires many calories, as hunter gatherers travel a distance of 6-16 km daily.

In modern times however, we live under much different circumstances than those which we evolved under. Our modern lifestyle is largely spent indoors, much of it sitting in front of a screen. Our modern diet is rich with processed foods that are calorie rich, and high in fat, sugar and salt, all of which trigger our brains to want more. Modern foods in fact have been specifically designed by food scientists to be addictive, because the more we eat, the more we buy, and the more the food industry profits.
This helps explain why 30% of children/youth (aged 5-17) are overweight or obese, and why 64% of adult Canadians are overweight or obese (Public Health Canada, 2019). In the USA, 72% of adults are overweight or obese (CDC, 2018).

Self-Help Strategies

Do's

Do try the following preventive strategies to help prevent having cravings in the first place:

- **Get enough sleep**. Being sleep deprived worsens cravings. Thus, ensure that you are getting enough

sleep. The average teen needs 8-10 hrs of sleep, and the average adult needs 7-9 hrs. Most North American teens are unfortunately not getting enough sleep.

- **Deal with stress.** What stresses are you under at home, work, school or relationships? Try to come up with a plan to deal and cope with each stress. Being stressed out increases cravings.

Are you experiencing a craving? Try these strategies.

- **Drink a large glass of water and wait for a few minutes**. If the craving goes away, you were probably just thirsty. When the body is thirsty, it can trigger a craving. In one study, drinking an extra 1.5 L of water a day was shown to help overweight female subjects to eat less, and lose weight (Vij, 2014).
- **Take a brisk walk for 15-minutes**. Research shows that when people have food cravings such as for chocolate, physical exercise can reduce the craving (Ledochowski, 2015).
- **Distraction.** Take a break from what you are doing and do something different.
- **Chew something, such as sugar-free gum, or something else**. Chewing has been shown in numerous studies to lower appetite and cravings for food (Miguel-Kergoat, 2015).
- Ask yourself:
  - Am I bored? If so, then do something to help with your boredom, e.g. listen to some music; talk to someone; read a book; play a video game, etc.
  - Am I stressed? If so, then do something to deal with your stress. Do something to relax, e.g. take a nap, go for a walk or sit outside, call up a friend or loved one to chat; meditate; listen to relaxation music, etc.
- **Avoid drops in your blood sugar.**
  - You may be getting cravings because you are actually hungry, or your blood sugar is low.
  - If so, then ensure that you are eating a healthy diet, in order to avoid sudden drops in blood sugar.
  - For example, a diet high in processed carbohydrates and sweets (e.g. eating white bread and chips for lunch) will give you a sugar high, but then you may experience cravings when your blood sugar drops later on.
  - Instead, eat meals that are similar to what someone with diabetes might eat, in order to have more gradual increases in blood glucose, and avoid sudden drops.
  - For example, eat
    - Meals with complex carbohydrates, such as whole grain carbohydrates that are high in fiber (as opposed to white bread, or processed carbs).
    - Increase healthy dietary protein to 25% of your diet. One study showed that increasing dietary protein helped weight loss in overweight males (Leidy, 2012).

Still having cravings?

- Have healthier snacks on hand such as:
  - Nuts.
  - Fresh fruits and vegetables. Fresh fruits and vegetables have fiber, which is filling.
  - Low sugar yogurt. Note that for many people, high fat yogurt is actually a good thing, as it helps trigger satiety, i.e. tells your body that you have eaten enough.
  - Cheese
  - Hummus.
  - Air popped popcorn.
  - For more examples of healthy snacks, see “Healthy Snacks for Adults” (Health Link BC) https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/healthy-snacks-adults

Don'ts

- **Don’t keep tempting foods in the home**. Modern carbs (e.g. crackers, white bread, etc.) and junk foods or desert foods have been designed to be addictive.

- **Don’t blame yourself for being “weak” or get upset at your loved ones for giving in to urges**. Many modern foods (such as processed foods, junk foods and deserts) are designed to be addictive.
- **Don’t buy diet soda**. Diet sodas are marketed as being low in calories, which would thus make it seem that they are a healthy choice. Unfortunate, studies show that drinking diet soda actually increases weight gain. It is believed that the artificial sweeteners in diet drinks are bad because 1) they still encourage your body to produce insulin, which makes your body store calories from other foods you have eaten; 2) it conditions your taste buds for sweetness, and 3) you become entitled to eat more (Zetlin, 2018).

Are You Still Struggling with Food Cravings?

See a health professional such as a family physician, paediatrician if you are still struggling with food cravings. They can help ensure that there aren't any medical issues contributing. They can also recommend other professionals that may be helpful such as registered dieticians, or mental health professionals.

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About this Document

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