



Food Cravings: What Do They Mean?

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Many people struggling to lose weight or eat more healthfully feel discouraged by food cravings that seem to undermine their good intentions. Food cravings are quite common, especially among women, according to a new review of the topic in the *Journal of Nutrition*. Many different factors may create food cravings, although which are the most important and how cravings should be dealt with are far from clear.

Food cravings are at least partly related to sensory appeal. Foods high in both sugar and fat are the most commonly craved foods, especially chocolate. An earlier report in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* notes that, although chocolate cravings are linked with sweet cravings, people generally report that these cravings are not satisfied by other sweets.

Some research has found a physiological basis for cravings, according to the new *Journal of Nutrition* review. According to some studies, carbohydrate initiates a chain reaction that theoretically can change levels of neurotransmitters influencing mood. Research with carbohydrate-cravers suggests that cravings for sweets may come with negative or depressed feelings that could be relieved as those levels change, but this idea is not universally accepted. Some studies, like one in the *International Journal of Obesity and Related Metabolic Disorders*, suggest that carbohydrate snacks may not necessarily improve mood.

Uncomfortably low blood sugar may be another physiological cause for a craving for sweets as the body tries to normalize blood sugar levels. Others propose that cravings may stem from nutritional deficiencies. For example, lack of adequate magnesium in the diet could be behind a chocolate craving. Chocolate is a good source of magnesium. But avocados and spinach are far more concentrated sources, and we rarely hear of people craving those foods. Some cravings, especially for chocolate, seem to fluctuate with a woman's hormonal changes.

A large body of research shows that thoughts and feelings about food are also strongly influenced by non-physical factors. People who go on diets that forbid certain foods almost always end up craving those foods. According to a report in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, cravers are often more concerned about their weight than non-cravers. But is this because out-of-control cravings cause undesired weight gain, or because excess concern with weight and dieting leads to more cravings?

Not everyone experiences food cravings. But scientists say we should understand that for those who do, their cravings are real and should be respected.

For people whose cravings seem to be physiological, eating regular meals and not allowing hunger to become overwhelming can help prevent dropping blood sugar from acting as a trigger. Choosing whole grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes for most of the day's carbohydrate will supply important nutrients and reduces roller-coaster effects on blood sugars.

For those who seem to crave foods in order to cope with their feelings, eating only small amounts of less-nutritious craved foods, along with a nutritionally balanced snack or meal, may be appropriate. Some experts observe that the more we use certain foods to ease emotionally laden times, the more we condition ourselves to crave them in the future. For this reason, efforts

to find other ways to ease emotional pain are likely worthwhile. Exercise, for example, has proven to have positive, mood-elevating effects.

Finally, don't create cravings by making overly strict rules as you aim for healthy eating habits. No food needs to be eliminated in order to create a healthy diet – it's how often and in what portion it is eaten that counts.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*TM can help. Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.