

This is Your Brain...Your Brain on Cravings

Most of us experience cravings every now and then. In a study published in *Appetite*, 97 percent of women and 68 percent of men report having cravings. The most commonly craved foods are also higher in calories.

And while there is some evidence that food cravings could be a sign of nutrient deficiency, how many of us that crave salty foods are actually deficient in sodium? A craving is actually often a state of mind, a strong emotional drive towards a certain food.

Here are a few techniques to curb cravings:

Vary your food choices - It turns out that when researchers looked into what people were eating, they found that when we eat a monotonous diet (the same foods over and over), we tend to have more cravings than when we eat a more varied diet.

Focus on a mental picture – Neuroimaging studies clearly show that when we have cravings, certain parts of our brain are more stimulated, so we can fall into a craving-food-reward pathway unintentionally. Have you ever noticed when you're very busy, you don't tend to have the cravings that you do when you've got extra time on your hands? When your mind uses its working memory to focus on other things, like work, or even imagery (like a rainbow or detailed beautiful scenery), it directly competes with the part of the brain causing the craving. Only one of the two wins the battle.

Get up and go – Hormones, memories tied to foods, stress, being in a particular place, or time of day can contribute to a quest for munchies. In addition, cravings are stronger when we are hungry or dieting. Exercise, whether a walk or run, diminishes cravings. So when cravings hit, hit the road.

“Pair” down the craved food – Small amounts of craved foods are okay, but the extra calories that we eat to satisfy the cravings are not. If you can pair a small amount of your craved food, with a lower-calorie, slower to digest food (typically this means more protein or fiber in it), you achieve the same effect. A good example would be a small piece of chocolate on high fiber cereal flakes.

Reference: Fesler, K. 2014. The Craving Brain. *Tufts Nutrition*, 15(1), 14-17.

