

[IMAGE]

Curb the Cravings

By Peter W. Crownfield

What's your favorite food craving? Chocolate, potato chips or fast food? Winter is prime time for food cravings. To make your New Year's resolutions work for you, learn how to curb your appetite for the foods you think you want, but definitely don't need to be eating.

Here's an all-too-familiar scenario for the average American: It's 7 p.m. and you're glued to the couch. Despite the fact that you only finished dinner a few hours ago, the hunger pangs are in full swing. Your cravings are fueled not necessarily by the fact that you're actually hungry, but because you've been "forced" to endure a veritable slew of food-related TV commercials. Now you're consumed by thoughts of cheeseburgers, ice cream and gooey microwavable snacks. Inevitably, you give in to the urges and head to the kitchen or nearby fast-food joint.

Your food cravings also might be caused by what you've eaten (or not eaten) that day. If you didn't eat enough or consumed too many processed, carbohydrate-laden foods, your body never really got the nutrition it needed to feel full. And of course, there are other common causes of cravings, including dieting, lifestyle and stress. No matter the cause, the reality is that cravings often lead to overeating - usually of high-fat, nutrient-deficient foods - which takes its toll on your health over time. What can you do to help curb the cravings? Here are some simple tips to keep in mind.

A man's hand removing a chocolate chip cookie for the cookie jar. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register
Mark Start the day right. An abundance of evidence suggests eating a hearty, healthy breakfast helps limit cravings throughout the day. According to a University of Texas at El Paso study, people who ate breakfast consumed 5 percent fewer calories than those who skipped the meal. Of course, you can't pig out on simple carbohydrates and processed foods for breakfast, because all that will do is spike your blood sugar, leading to hunger pangs by mid-morning. A good rule of thumb is to eat some form of protein and complex carbohydrate (whole grains, etc.) every morning.

Perhaps the best evidence in favor of eating a healthy breakfast comes courtesy of the National Weight Control Registry: a list of people who've lost at least 30 pounds and kept it off for a year or more. Nearly 78

percent of those 3,000 people regularly eat a morning meal. A coincidence? Not likely.

Bring on the water. Water has several important benefits in terms of curbing food cravings. First, your stomach can only handle so much of anything at one time, whether it's liquid or solid. Drinking a glass or two of water before eating means you get full quicker - making it less likely you'll be able to gorge (without feeling awful afterward). Foods with high water content (like cucumbers, celery, watermelon and orange slices) achieve the same result, according to Dr. Hollie Raynor of Brown University's Weight Control and Diabetes Research Center.

Second, drinking water increases your body's ability to burn calories, say German researchers, who found that people who drank 17 ounces of water burned approximately 30 percent more calories in the subsequent 90 minutes. Who knew doing something as simple as drinking water could actually help you lose weight and curb cravings?

Know yourself. This requires a bit of self-discipline. Pay attention to your cravings. Do they happen at the same time every day? Do they happen during a certain activity or when you are with a certain group of people? If 7:30 p.m. is the time your worst cravings kick in, make sure you are doing something during that time besides hanging around the kitchen, waiting to give in to temptation. Play a game with your kids, help them with their homework, or better yet, head to the gym for a quick workout.

Easier said than done, to be sure, but sometimes, a little diversion is just what you need to avoid eating yourself out of house and home. The busier you are, the less time you have to think about that mouthwatering chili-cheese dog. Just make sure you aren't so busy that you don't have time to eat healthy, consistent meals, because otherwise, you'll just revert to your bad eating habits.

Practice portion control. In a world of ever-increasing portion sizes, it's important to eat in moderation. This is true no matter what you're eating, but it's particularly important when you're eating high-calorie, high-fat and/or high-sugar foods. It might be hard at first, but get in the habit of eating a few slices of pizza, not half the pie, or a small bowl of ice cream for dessert instead of a half gallon.

Even more importantly, eating a number of small meals throughout the day, rather than a few large ones, keeps your metabolism high, which means you burn more calories, and also means you're never in that "starvation mode" that can lead to binge eating.

Keep junk food out of reach. What's the best way to avoid eating junk food all the time? Don't surround yourself with it. The premise is simple - if you don't stock your kitchen cabinets with cookies, chips and candy, you won't be as tempted to eat it, and if you do have a craving, it certainly will take a little more effort to satisfy it. After all, reaching into the freezer for that container of ice cream is a whole lot easier than having to get in your car and drive to the store.

Limiting the variety of unhealthy snacks at your disposal also can help, according to researchers. Over an 18-month period, overweight people who kept only a few varieties of snacks on hand lost more weight than those who stocked their shelves with an endless supply of different treats.

Try healthier options. No one's trying to convince you that a salad is a satisfying replacement for that fudge brownie craving, but you often can find a healthier substitute that still tastes great. For example, if you're in the mood for pizza loaded with meat and cheese, why not make your own healthier version? Try a whole-wheat crust, low-fat cheese and extra-lean turkey or ham for toppings.

Live a little. While it's a good rule of thumb to limit your consumption of junk food, either by resisting temptation or trying healthier options, it's also important not to deprive yourself. Evidence suggests that people who consistently quell their cravings are more likely to give in to them over time than those who occasionally indulge in their favorite foods.

Chocolate chip cookie. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark There are different schools of thought in this regard; some suggest you should try to eat healthy during the week and enjoy your favorite foods (regardless of whether they're healthy or not) on one or both weekend days. Others propose a less stringent schedule, emphasizing that you should eat what you want to, when you want to, but always try to make it as healthy and moderate (particularly in terms of portion size) as possible.

Don't stick to the couch. Ah, the couch - that wonderful land of comfort and immobility. There are at least two consequences of excessive couch lounging: 1) The more time you spend sitting or lying down, the less time you can spend engaging in more active pursuits, like taking a walk or exercising; and 2) Eventually, those TV commercials are going to overwhelm you, and then you actually *will* get up - but only to head to the fridge or your local fast-food haunt.

Sleep it off. The more time you spend asleep, the less time is available to rummage through the refrigerator. Moreover, research suggests inadequate sleep affects hormones that influence appetite, leading to weight

gain. In a recent study, people who slept seven to nine hours a night were only half as likely to be obese than people who slept only five hours.

Sleep also is important because mood is a key contributor to poor eating. In general, the less sleep we get, the more cranky and run down we get over time. When you're in a bad mood or depressed, it's easy to turn to your favorite foods for comfort. For too many Americans, comfort foods are of the high-fat, high-calorie variety.

So, next time you're out driving and the steering wheel seems to turn itself toward your favorite donut shop, just remember: You're in control. Follow these simple suggestions and you'll be in the best possible position to curb the cravings.

Peter W. Crownfield is the executive editor of *To Your Health*. Direct all comments and questions to editor -at- toyourhealth.com.

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