

What is a Food Craving?

Urges are desires to eat when you are not hungry. **Food cravings** are similar, but may be more specified intense desires to consume foods that are difficult to resist. Food cravings are very common, and they don't mean something is wrong! Cravings are often time-limited, coming about and going away in a half hour. If the craving is satisfied by eating the food, it may not "go away" as suggested. There are individual differences related to intensity and duration of cravings. Cravings that last longer than 1 hour (without eating) should be discussed; you may want to determine causes of these cravings and develop a personal solution to diminish them.

Why Do We Crave?

Physiological Factor:

Researchers once believed cravings were the result of a deficit of a nutrient or vitamin. However, research has failed to support this hypothesis.

Also, people once believed food cravings resulted from restricting calories, but recent evidence suggests that the opposite may occur.

During caloric restriction, food cravings may actually diminish!

Psychological Factor:

Evidence suggests food cravings are "conditioned" responses to hunger. In this sense, food cravings are habitual and are the result of consuming a particular food while hungry.

Also, food cravings tend to be associated with hunger. In other words, the hungrier you are, the more intense your cravings may be. The better you are at managing hunger and eating at regular intervals, the fewer cravings you will experience.

Finally, food cravings can occur in response to emotions. Some people tend to experience stronger desires and eat when stressed or anxious; others eat when happy or sad.

Managing Psychological Cravings

A group of strategies called the "5 D's" may help when you feel a craving arise.

Delay giving in to the craving for at least 15 minutes. As mentioned above, often the craving will subside. If not, move on to the next strategy.

Distract yourself from thinking about the food you crave by getting involved in an activity that requires concentration and is not compatible with eating. Phone a friend, clean your house, or anything that works for you. If it doesn't work, move on to the next strategy.

Distance yourself from the food you crave. Take a stroll or go to the store (not the grocery store!). Move away from the temptation. If you still feel tempted, try the next strategy.

Determine how strong your craving is. How strong is your desire to eat the food? Rate your cravings on a scale of 1-10. If a craving is very strong, you may want to give in and "satisfy" it, but be aware that this may inadvertently strengthen the craving. If you decide you will have some of the food you crave, the next question is, how much?

Decide what amount of food is reasonable. Take an appropriate portion and return the rest. Savor every bite and don't feel guilty. It's important not to feel defeated if you occasionally give in to a craving.

Additional Strategies to Deal with Cravings

- Stick to your meal plan and eat at regular intervals. Build a supportive environment.
- Determine the probable cause of cravings. Were you hungry when the craving occurred or was it associated with any emotion? Resolve the emotions without eating. Rely on stress management skills.
- If you must consume the craved food, do so in small portions that fit into your daily caloric balance. (Be aware that food cravings may be inadvertently strengthened by consuming the food that is craved).
- If you need to consume something, use a portion-controlled snack pack, fruit, or vegetable.
- Stop demonizing food or food groups. Try not label foods as “bad.” It is not the food so much as the portion size.
- Drink plenty of water. Water may also make you feel full, so you’ll feel less hungry. Don’t keep foods you crave in the house and don’t go shopping when you are hungry. You are more likely to buy temptation foods.

Conclusion

Cravings may be a matter of individual difference and may be learned responses or stimulation from the environment. It’s important to learn to handle cravings instead of letting them become a calorie management problem. Building supportive environments, calorie knowledge, and stress management tools (discussed in other lessons) are important strategies.