



Food Cravings: It's all about brain chemistry

BY EVA HENRY, M.D., ABPN, ABAARM, FMNM | AGEWELL BRAIN CENTER

"I just have to eat that extra bowl of broccoli, I can't resist!" Food cravings are rarely for the healthy foods that our doctors recommend. Food cravings are typically for those guilty pleasures: cheese pizza, chips, cookies, chocolate, ice cream and donuts!

Why do we crave salty and sugary treats? Human brains process signals from eating for survival and eating for pleasure differently, and medical research has revealed the answer why.

Processed snacks with high levels of sugar and salt activate the reward center of your brain, causing fast surges of the neurotransmitter called dopamine. Frequent consumption of these foods will habituate dopamine receptors in the reward center. Over time, more dopamine is needed just to feel "normal." As a result, you crave the things that would recreate that abnormally higher level of dopamine, and without them you feel crummy. Also, the stress hormone cortisol and poor sleep suppress your dopamine. That's why when you're stressed and tired you tend to seek out your "comfort" foods.

Like me, if you often fall for the cheese trap or the chocolate ice cream trap, you might be interested to know what dairy does to the brain. The casein in dairy contains casomorphine, which can activate opioid receptors in the brain, very similarly to heroin! Casomorphine activates the reward center to produce dopamine. Heroin triggers at dangerously high levels (thousands times higher), and creates the intense high and withdrawal effects; but the underlying brain reward mechanism is the same. Any substance that activates dopamine receptors in the brain reward center can produce certain levels of euphoria. Sugar also has similar effects on dopamine receptors. You can see why the combination of sugar plus dairy is so addictive!

Healthy dopamine levels balanced with other major neurotransmitters are critical for mood, motivation, movement and focus, and not just regulating problems with food addictions. See a neurologist for a comprehensive neurotransmitters analysis and treatment. Correcting neurotransmitters can be very complex as they are all interconnected. Neurotransmitters affect

many other organ systems so you should consult with qualified experts.

Numerous research studies have shown that obese people have lower sensitivity to their dopamine receptors. This translates to one's need to consume more food to feel satisfied. Food cravings and addictions can be a serious and overlooked health issue. As you can see, craving bad food is not merely psychological or about having a weak willpower; it is physical and biochemically based. Checking and balancing your brain chemistry can be a key factor in removing obstacles to successful dieting. Unfortunately, the addictive sugar and dairy create negative effects on brain health. It is not just your waistline that you need to watch out for. So while you love those kinds of food, they certainly don't love you back!

Dr. Eva Henry is board-certified in Neurology and Anti-Aging, Regenerative Medicine. Her passion is to utilize an integrative approach to prevent and treat neurological illnesses.

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