

## Cravings: Ways to get a handle on a 'sweet' tooth

Written by Nicole Winbush MD  
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Many of us (including myself) have regular cravings for sweet foods. In limited quantities, sweets may be something that are a manageable and sustainable part of our daily food intake. However, because these foods can be so habit forming and are so widely available many of us find ourselves eating more of these foods than we would like. There are many potentially negative health effects of eating a diet that contains moderate to high levels of processed sugars. Most of us are familiar with concerns about excess calories and weight gain. However, there is increasing evidence, that sugar (and other processed sweeteners) can have negative impacts on our mood and may play a role in increased depression.

Sweeteners may also affect the balance of chemicals in our brain and impair our memory and may be a contributor to chronic joint pain and arthritis. So, if you have ever gotten the sense that your sweet tooth is getting out of hand, I provide the following strategies for you to try.

**Respect the craving. Your body is trying to tell you something.** Our body is a beautiful interconnected system that is constantly working to maintain our balance and health. When our body feels it needs something, there are many ways it will work to signal our mind of its needs. By really tuning in and listening we can decode these messages and provide our body and mind what they most need to function their best. A craving for sweets may signal general hunger or low blood sugar. Perhaps your craving for a sweet snack is just your mind's way of telling you that it is bored and that eating a snack might give it 'something to do', perhaps you are sad or lonely. So, the next time a craving comes up, just take one minute and ask yourself the following question: "Why do I want to eat this right now?" and wait for the answer. If you are hungry, there are better choices you can make that would satisfy your hunger in a way that won't leave you craving another candy bar in a couple of hours (e.g. nuts, an apple, a banana). If you are bored or sad, can you call a friend or get out of the house and go for a walk?

**Make sure that you have lots of 'good sweets' in your diet.** There are many foods that are naturally sweet and can go a long way to satisfy our sweet craving and also provide us with a wealth of vitamins and minerals that will allow our body and mind to function their best. Really great options to get natural sweets in your diet include: sweet potatoes and yams, squash, carrots, parsnips and beets and natural whole grains (like brown rice, barley etc).

**Maybe what you need is a little more bitterness and watch the salt.** The concept of balancing the flavors in our diet is something that is very common in traditional diets from around the world. Most traditional diets incorporate a balance of flavors throughout the day (foods that are sweet, bitter, sour etc). However, our western diet is often lacking in these other balancing flavors and can lead to a state of imbalance where our body craves more and more of the sweet flavor. In addition, eating a diet that is high in salt can also increase one's craving for sweets. Bitter flavor does not mean bad tasting. One way in which many African-Americans used to get more of the bitter flavor in their diet was more regular consumption of bitter greens like mustard and collard. Lettuces, celery and salads and vinegar can all provide more bitter flavor.

**Limit your choices to better ones.** One of the ways that we can set ourselves up for success is to plan ahead and limit our choices. If you know that you are prone to late night cravings for ice cream, don't buy it. If it is in the house it will be difficult not to eat it. Provide yourself with a

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better choice (for instance Greek yogurt and fruit). When the late night craving strikes, scoop out some yogurt and stir in some fruit. If you put it in the blender for a few seconds and then the freezer, you will have a healthier substitute for ice cream, the next time a craving arises.

**Be kind to yourself.** If you eat something you had not intended to, don't beat yourself up. Generally reflect on: "Why did I eat that? Is there something that I can do differently next time?" and move on. That bad choice is in the past, at every point during our day and during our lives we can recommit ourselves to doing our best and making the best possible choice for our health at that moment.

I hope you find some of these strategies helpful. If you do let me know. Are there other strategies that you have used to successfully break the holds of a sugar habit or some other craving or addiction? I would love to hear from you.

*Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. She wants to hear from you! To respond to this article, request topics for future articles and for additional resources visit [www.functionwellmedicine.com](http://www.functionwellmedicine.com) or LIKE Function Well Medicine on Facebook.*

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