



WHAT WOMEN WANT!

A LOOK AT WHAT WE CRAVE AND WHY?

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Food cravings can be described as 'an intense desire to eat a specific food'. The frequency, strength and types of food cravings have been found to differ between men and women, different phases of the menstrual cycle and in some cases with body mass index (BMI). The underlying causes of food cravings are poorly understood however, there are some theories. Let's take a closer look.

WHY DO WE CRAVE FOOD?

There are many theories on why we crave certain foods - one such theory is that there is a release of dopamine, a chemical hormone messenger in the brain which has been proposed to induce food cravings by increasing perceptions of how food tastes. Factors such as mood and food imagery are also common possible causes to food cravings. A study by Gilhooy et al found that foods that were craved were twice as high in calories as the normal daily diet, on average were lower in protein and fibre and higher in fat. This seems to link with the common craving culprits out there such as chocolate, ice cream, take aways, fried chips etc.

There are theories that cravings for certain types of food are linked to their ingredients. Chocolate for example, contains a certain amino acid, which is important for the regulation of the body's release of endorphins. One would naturally want more as endorphins are the feel good hormones and are normally released following something that has caused stress to help us relax. Exercise and sleep are two alternative ways to help the release of endorphins however; a piece of chocolate seems like a quicker and easier way to get your endorphin fix.

Certain cravings in women are linked to their menstrual cycle, for example chocolate also contains large quantities of iron, which can be depleted during the menstrual cycle. Another common craving is salt. Craving salt may be partly due to being dehydrated. When dehydrated the body loses water, electrolytes, and salt, and by ingesting salt, water retention can be increased. Craving salt can also be a sign of diabetes, heart disease, and sickle cell anaemia. Carbohydrates, or particularly sugars, are yet another common craving. These cravings occur often in the middle of the afternoon when energy is at its lowest and where a starchy food would boost energy.



So we crave, what can we do about it?

In the Gilhooy study a relationship was shown that if participants had a higher lifetime body mass index (BMI) then they would have larger portion sizes of craved foods. Therefore, we need to watch our weight overall. It was found that the hungrier one was, the more frequently the cravings came and they were stronger which does make logical sense. The study showed that if participants reduced their overall calorie intake, they craved higher energy dense foods but they got cravings less often and so were found to have a greater loss of weight. Therefore, simply put if you restrict how much food you are taking overall in a day you will get cravings less often but when you do get a craving you may want to indulge even greater.

Another approach to dealing with food cravings is more about focusing on the mind than the diet. A study by Alberts using a mindfulness based intervention showed much lower levels of food cravings, dichotomous thinking, body dissatisfaction, emotional eating and external eating. Dichotomous thinking is a fancier way to say we think about food in a very black and white manner of being good or bad only which brings possibility of guilt and hopelessness when "bad" foods are eaten. Some mindfulness practices are connecting ones internal feelings such as hunger to external and emotional cues to eat. Thoughts of food, body and shape need to be reduced to stopping dysfunctional thinking patterns. One is taught to be attuned to yourself and how you are feeling and how you are craving food. Mindfulness teaches one to be willing to recognise and not ignore uncomfortable or negative experiences but without reacting to them and so this reduces eating impulsively. Increasing awareness of one's food environment takes time to pick up on food habits and change them and so weight may not be affected immediately.

Cut the crave

So we have learnt that food cravings are complex things to understand which science has not been able to fully understand. Different people crave food in different ways with different foods. From the research we can see one should try monitoring our daily intakes better, and if needed restrict our total energy intakes which will decrease our craving frequencies. Becoming mindful of our eating habits and environment as well as making the links between them and our food cravings will help one deal with root causes and triggers thereby assisting in preventing food cravings and unhealthy habits. Another suggestion would be to keep your energy levels up by consuming low GI meals frequently throughout the day, preventing a severe blood sugar decrease and in turn craving excessive amounts of refined or sugary carbohydrates. The FUTURELIFE® range has some great options: FUTURELIFE® Smart food™, FUTURELIFE® HIGH PROTEIN Smart food™ and FUTURELIFE® ZERO Smart food™ all offer low GI benefits to help sustain your energy levels throughout the day.



REFERENCES

1. Gilhooly CH, Das SK, Golden JK, McCrory MA, Dallal GE, Saltzman E et al. Food cravings and energy regulation: the characteristics of craved foods and their relationship with eating behaviors and weight change during 6 months of dietary energy restriction. *International Journal of Obesity*. 2007; 31;1849–1858.
2. Alberts H.J.E.M, Thewissen R, Raes L. Dealing with problematic eating behaviour. The effects of a mindfulness-based intervention on eating behaviour, food cravings, dichotomous thinking and body image concern. *Appetite*. June 2012;58 (3) 847–851