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Is Sugar Addiction Why So Many January Diets Fail?

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[ELIZA BARCLAY](http://www.npr.org/people/348764033/eliza-barclay)

We've survived the stretch between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, when rich, sweet treats come at us non-stop. Now is the season of reform, when gym memberships, [cleanse books](http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/02/15/146927835/can-a-diet-clean-out-toxins-in-the-body) and weight-loss plans sell like gangbusters.

The cycle has become so predictable, and disheartening, as our collective motivation to change our ways dissolves by February like a sugar cube in a glass of champagne. I've certainly done my fair share of January food-restriction experiments that fizzled at the first sign of a Valentine's Day candy heart.

For me, it's refined sugar, pure and simple, that, over time, I've identified as the food I would most love to be able to resist.

This year, I vowed to seek out new ways to stay out of the drawer my colleague keeps stocked with chocolate bars of all brands and sizes **—** an alluring stash stored right next to my desk.

I'm not alone in singling out sugar and the undue power it wields over me, according to researchers.

Some self-identified sugar addicts have managed to eliminate it from their diets, and those who are successful swear by it.

"I have not had refined sugar or flour in about 15 years, and I do not feel deprived," [Michael Prager](http://michaelprager.com/), a journalist who writes and speaks on food addiction, tells me. "I just found that life was better without it."

Health authorities agree that Americans' [current](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19704096) habit of consuming an average of 22 teaspoons, or 110 grams, of sugar per day is too much. The American Heart Association suggests that women consume no more than 6 teaspoons (30 grams) a day, and men limit themselves to 9 teaspoons (45 grams) a day.

I doubt I'm consuming 22 teaspoons a day — I'm not a soda drinker, nor do I binge on cookies or ice cream. But regardless of whether the quantity you consume is excessive by these standards, if you're like me, the frequency and strength of the sugar cravings alone may be enough to drive you to seek help.When I eat sugar, I can feel something devilish turn on in my brain: a voice saying, "More, more, more."

So I asked Gearhardt and Prager for their tips on how to conquer sugar cravings. I also referred to Avena and Talbott's book, *Why Diets Fail*. Many of their tips overlapped, so I've compiled them here.

* If you think you are highly sensitive to sugar, then trying to have just a little may be worse than having none at all, because it could keep the sensitivity alive, says Prager. Instead, try to eliminate it entirely for at least three weeks to see if the cravings fade.
* When embarking on a sugar-free mission, try to keep the long-term goals at the forefront of your mind. Keep reminding yourself of how much you'll enjoy feeling stronger and healthier, or how you'll enjoy better-fitting clothes.
* Take a week or two to monitor exactly when the cravings hit. Then figure out what the cues are — like stress, boredom, emotional downers or the need for a distraction.
* In these moments when the cravings hit, pause and think about what you need or do not need to eat at the moment. Are you actually hungry? Can you fulfill the need another way, like taking a quick walk?
* Find new foods that are rewarding, like new kinds of nuts and fruits, and keep them around. "Our environment always shoves in our face hyper-rewarding foods, and we can't control that," says Gearhardt. "We*can* keep foods we do like around, so that if we find ourselves in a bad mood, with cravings, we're not setting ourselves up to fail."
* Exercise. A recent brain imaging [study](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&ved=0CDYQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.researchgate.net%2Fpublication%2F257249390_Physical_exercise_and_brain_responses_to_images_of_high-calorie_food%2Ffile%2F60b7d526fca593e213.pdf&ei=6vDNUo3yCsTAyAHKk4HIDA&usg=AFQjCNEPp_Iqc5O66CPIH5ifFp8wcGmsjQ&sig2=cYHdlyXtyX8UmuxGcTzp8Q&bvm=bv.59026428,d.aWc) found that cardiovascular activity may repair the part of the brain affected by food addiction. It also found that people who exercise regularly had a lower "reward response" to images of palatable food.

Still, these strategies may not work for everyone. If you feel like you're white-knuckling it and it's just too hard, Geardhardt recommends seeking professional help from food addiction specialists.