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# The Healthy Eater Who Craves Junk Food: How to Manage Cravings

You try your best to eat clean, nutritious foods — whole grains, lean proteins, healthy fats, fruits and vegetables. You know your way around the produce section of the supermarket. But sometimes, it can feel like it's impossible to resist the call of a bag of chips or a box of cookies.

You might keep quiet about your cravings and feel guilty about how they impact your healthy eating goals. But even the healthiest eaters can struggle with craving junk food. And the truth is, it's not a matter of willpower. It's just part of being human.

Feedback

## Why do you crave junk food even when you eat healthy?

"There are many reasons we make the food choices we do. Sometimes we need a familiar and comfortable taste to help get over a bad moment. Sometimes we are connecting with our family, friends or culture," said Yaffi Lvova, a registered dietitian with Banner Health.

Cravings are a normal part of eating. Here's why you might crave junk food:

- **Your brain wants a reward:** Foods high in [sugar](#), salt or fat trigger your brain's reward system and release feel-good chemicals like dopamine. You might crave that salty snack or sugary treat because it literally feels rewarding. Foods with

combinations of sugar, [salt](#) and fat can be even more likely to cause cravings.

- **Emotions play a big role:** Stress, boredom, sadness or even happiness can be emotional eating triggers. Comfort food often feels like the easiest way to deal with strong feelings.
- **Eating habits and environment matter:** Your routines, surroundings and even smells or sounds can influence your cravings. If you always snack in front of the TV, you're likely to want a snack when you turn the TV on. The scent of tempting foods can also trigger cravings.
- **You need more nutrition:** If you don't eat enough calories or get the overall nutrition you need during the day, you might crave junk food late in the day. "This often gets called emotional eating, but it's very often just the body just trying to get the nutrition it needs before bedtime," Lvova said.

## How can health goals vs. cravings cause conflict?

"We choose what to eat for all kinds of reasons. We also seem to be programmed toward feelings of guilt where nutrition is concerned, no matter what those choices are," Lvova said.

You might feel conflicted when your cravings don't align with your health goals. Giving in might lead to guilt or shame, and labeling foods as good or bad can make this inner conflict even harder to navigate.

"Guilt is associated with a restrictive diet. If you feel like you must follow strict diet days and cheat days, or if you label foods good and bad, you are more likely to feel guilt over your choices," Lvova said.

Keep in mind that craving or eating junk food doesn't mean you've failed. All foods can have a place in your relationship with food and your balanced diet. Your eating habits should support your overall well-being, not stress you out.

## How can you manage cravings without guilt?

"We feel guilt when our actions don't match our values. Very often, those values are informed by society's ideas of health, and how we should look to represent that health," Lvova said. "To ditch the guilt, we can either change up our actions or we can re-inspect our values to make sure they are based in real science and that they fit us as people."

If you decide you would like to change your actions, remember that managing food cravings isn't about restriction. It's about embracing balance. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Practice mindful eating:** Slow down and notice your food, what it tastes like and how it makes you feel. Mindful eating helps you make thoughtful, satisfying choices.
- **Don't sweat the small stuff:** You can eat mainly nutrient-dense foods and still allow space for less-nutritious options. "You can feel happy about the good choice you made for lunch and know that a Snickers isn't going to tank the whole day," Lvova said. The goal is balance, not perfection.
- **Plan satisfying meals:** "Take your nutrition meal by meal," Lvova said. Meals rich in protein, fiber and healthy fats keep you full longer and may reduce cravings. Build meals that truly satisfy your hunger and taste buds.
- **Look for emotional triggers:** Are you hungry or are you stressed, tired or lonely? By spotting emotional triggers, you can address them without turning to food. Taking a walk, calling a friend or [meditating](#) might help.
- **Focus on adding, not subtracting:** "Can you add in a walk around the block? Include a vegetable with each meal? Focus on good hydration? When you can focus on what you can add to your diet and lifestyle, health becomes much less distressing. It can even be a source of joy," Lvova said.

## When should you get help?

Sometimes cravings or emotional eating feel overwhelming. If you're not happy with your eating patterns or you'd like more support in facing food cravings, it might be time to talk to a health care provider:

- **Registered dietitian:** A registered dietitian can help you create an eating plan tailored to your health goals and lifestyle. "Despite the word diet being in the name, many of us focus on a happier way of eating. Very often, people know what's healthy. A good RD can help identify the obstacles between you and the choices you want to make, then help you overcome those hurdles," Lvova said.
- **Behavioral health expert:** A behavioral health expert can help you explore emotional triggers and build healthier habits.