

Ask anyone what foods they crave, and most people will be able to reel off at least a couple of items without hesitation.

Take me, for example. My name is Elaine Magee, and I'm a chocoholic. Just about the only food I crave is chocolate (and sometimes cake and, about once a year, cream puffs or éclairs).

I find comfort in knowing I am not alone. Surveys estimate that almost 100% of young women and nearly 70% of young men had [food cravings](#) during the past year. That covers most of us, doesn't it?

It's All In Your Head

Those who don't have food cravings might say that such cravings are "all in your head," and new research suggests they are right. It is all in our heads: several specific areas of our brains, actually. Areas of the brain responsible for memory and sensing pleasure are partially to blame for keeping those food cravings coming.

Three regions of the brain -- the hippocampus, insula, and caudate - appear to be activated during food-craving episodes, according to new research from the Monell Chemical Senses Center. Their brain tests suggest that memory areas of the brain (which are responsible for associating a specific food with a reward) are actually more important to food cravings than the brain's reward center.

Further, blocking the opiate receptors in the brain, which sense pleasure, can blunt a person's desire to eat foods rich in fat and sugar, according to new research by Adam Drewnowski, PhD, of the University of Washington.

De-Stress to Discourage Cravings

Beyond the physiological reasons for food cravings, they often have something to do with emotion and desire.

"Food cravings arise to satisfy emotional needs, such as calming stress and reducing anxiety," says Drewnowski, a well-known researcher on taste and food preferences.

For many of us, cravings kick into high gear when we're stressed or anxious. Carbohydrates boost our levels of the hormone serotonin, which has a calming effect. And recent research suggests that the combination of fat and sugar may also have a calming effect.

Researchers from University of California at San Francisco put rats in a high-stress environment and discovered two key points: the stressed-out rats preferred to eat sugar and fat, and when the rats ate fat and sugar, their brains produced less of the stress-related hormones (the ones that trigger the fight-or-flight response).

It's in Our Genes, Too

Getting fat is an evolutionary advantage embedded in our genes, according to a recent American Psychological Society Observer article.

Humans have been able to survive times of famine and hardship throughout history due largely to our ability to store excess calories, consumed during times of plenty, as body fat. At some level, our bodies may be programmed to crave foods high in calories.

Also, several studies have suggested that eating a [diet lacking in variety can lead to more food cravings](#). But let's not overlook the obvious: It also doesn't hurt that the foods we typically crave taste so good and that we usually have many enjoyable memories associated with them. That history can be plenty powerful.

Don't Blame the Carbs

I don't know how many times I've heard people say that it's those awful, terrible carbohydrate foods they tend to crave. When I ask them what "carb" foods they are talking about, they usually name:

- Potato chips

- French fries
- Chocolate
- Rich ice cream
- Chocolate chip cookies
- Macaroni and cheese

Here's the thing: When you crave these foods, you're not just craving carbs, you're craving fat, too! According to Drewnowski, cravings that are spurred by emotions are typically for foods containing fat, sugar, or both.

Take a nutritional look at the top foods people say they crave and you'll see that almost every food contains more calories from fat than from carbohydrates.

	% calories from fat	% calories from carbs
Chocolate chip cookie	50%	46%
Macaroni and cheese	46%	37%
Milk chocolate candy bar	51%	46%
Dove chocolate ice cream bar	57%	42%
Fast-food french fries	44%	50%
Potato chips	56%	40%

7 Tips About Food Cravings

1. Out of sight is usually not out of mind

"Dietary restrictions definitely make cravings worse," warns Drewnowski. Does this mean it's best to give in to food cravings? That probably depends on your level of control once you begin eating. If you're able to satisfy a chocolate craving with a few chocolate kisses or a fun-size Snickers bar, Drewnowski says, "Go for it."

But if you are someone whose cravings get out of control (that is, you end up eating half a gallon of ice cream, a bag of chocolate chips, or a box of cookies), it gets more complicated. If this describes you, your best bet may be to have only portion-controlled amounts of your desired food on hand. Buy a single slice of pie or cake instead of a whole one; buy one chocolate-chip cookie instead of baking a batch; or treat yourself to a scoop of ice cream instead of a pint or half-gallon.

2. Make lower-calorie choices when possible

Will lower-calorie craving choices be as satisfying as the real deal? This depends on how great tasting the alternate food or beverages are. If you make lower-calorie, lower-fat brownies that taste just as yummy as regular brownies, they'll probably satisfy your fudge brownie craving. If you crave soda and you drink a glass of half diet soda and half real soda, chances are it will do the trick.

When Barbara Rolls, PhD, and colleagues from Pennsylvania State University fed 24 young women at their university laboratory, they found:

- Women who ate lower-calorie, slightly smaller dishes were no hungrier than those who ate regular dishes.
- Dieters liked the taste of the lower-calorie dishes just as much as that of the regular dishes.

3. Our environment is toxic

Everywhere we turn, our environment seems to be screaming at us to eat more fast food and junk food.

"Unhealthy food is highly accessible, it's convenient, it's engineered to taste good, it's heavily promoted, and it's inexpensive. If you wanted to engineer a good food environment, you'd have the reverse of all that," says Kelly D. Brownell, PhD, director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders.

4. Don't let yourself get too hungry

What happens when you skip a meal, or refrain from eating when you're truly hungry? Sooner or later, you get SO hungry that you end up overeating to compensate. It's in this state of extreme hunger that we tend to crave quick-fix foods like candy bars. Eating several meals through the day may help to control cravings and binge-type eating.

5. Start a cravings journal

If you have a real problem with food cravings, keep a cravings journal for a month. List the times of day you have cravings, the emotions you're feeling at the time, the foods you crave, and what and how much you ate. When you look back through your journal, ask yourself if there are any patterns, such as certain times of day when you tend to experience food cravings. Are there certain emotions or situations that tend to bring them on?

6. Smart carbs to the rescue

We've established that our bodies often crave high-fat and high-sugar (or high-refined-carb) foods. And we know that when we feed our stressed-out bodies carbohydrates, it helps calm them down. So the best way to calm our bodies and yet nourish them is to choose "smart carbs" like whole grains, beans, fruits, and vegetables. These foods give your body the carbs it craves along with lasting nutritional power from fiber, phytochemicals, vitamins, and minerals.

Craving a grilled cheese sandwich? Make it with whole-wheat bread and reduced-fat cheddar. Craving chocolate cake? Make it from scratch, substituting whole-wheat flour for half the white flour and Splenda for half of the sugar. Cut the recipe's fat in half by substituting some fat-free sour cream. For the rest of the butter or oil the recipe calls for, use a smarter fat like canola oil or a margarine high in monounsaturated fat and plant omega-3s.

7. Take care of yourself

Most of us could use a good dose of nurturing. If we take good care of ourselves day to day, we may be less likely to feel stressed, angry, unhappy, etc. -- and therefore less likely to crave comfort foods. If the voice inside you seems to be telling you to indulge in junk food every time you turn around, it may be a red flag that you need some nurturing. Maybe you need some support, time to yourself, or time to play a little.

Here are a few non-food ways to nurture yourself, along with their costs:

- Treat yourself to a facial (\$25 on up).
- Meet a friend for coffee (\$2 to \$5, depending on how fancy your coffee is and whether you are going Dutch).
- Read a good book or magazine. You can trade books and magazines with friends, too (free to \$10).
- Get a massage. It can come from a friend or spouse too, which makes it free, although you may need to reciprocate (free to \$75).
- Get a pedicure (\$15 to \$25).
- Take a hike -- literally! (free).

<http://www.m.webmd.com/diet/features/the-facts-about-food-cravings>