



Combating a Sweet Tooth

Quite a few of us have a sweet tooth, an occasional craving for a heavy sweet—whether that’s a pastry or chocolates or ice cream or cake. For most of us, our eating habits have become habituated from childhood. The high levels of sugars in our regular fast foods and soft drinks have made it even more likely that we’re used to high levels of sweetness in our daily-intake foods, even if they’re not desserts.

Realigning Dietary Habits

Recent food fads have emphasized eating home-grown, locally grown, natural, and organic. There is a push against processed sugars to align more with the body’s actual needs. National leaders are pushing for the elimination of childhood obesity.

Adults also have concerns about packing on the pounds. They’re focusing on portion control. They are using a variety of (somewhat balanced) diets to control weight for health and other reasons. Emotionally, it may be hard for people to feel “out of control” in their eating; giving in to the sugar craving may result in a temporary satisfaction, but there are

deeper frustrations that may emerge from that lack of self-control.

All this leads to the question of how people can control for their “sweet tooth”.

Identifying Causes for Sugar Cravings

Sugar cravings occur at different times and for different reasons. Some dietary research has pointed to the lack or insufficiency of night-time sleep as one of the causal factors leading to sugar and other snack-food cravings. Imbalances in hormonal secretions from the adrenal glands may also lead to sugar cravings. Stress may lead to hormone imbalances, which leave the body feeling depleted and fatigued; people often compensate for the fatigue by consuming sugar and filling up on caffeine.

Others habituate into poor eating habits. They may acclimate to a regular diet of processed sugars. (Some even suggest that sugar substitutes continue the cycle of high sweetness in a diet and so should not be consumed.) They may have a habit of eating a sugary dessert with every meal. Or they may eat sugary snacks to give themselves comfort—in the face of stress or anxiety. Others may eat at night to stay awake during a cram session. Or others use sugar as a pick-me-up in the afternoon, to give themselves an energy boost.

Self-awareness is critical in addressing the sweet tooth. Think about when you experienced the craving for sweets. What time was it? Where did that happen? What emotions were you feeling at the time? What did you do? How did you feel afterward?

Keep a list of temptations. Do you have access to doughnuts in the staff room before work? Cookies at the student club meeting? Decadent cheesecake at the cafeteria? Do your roommates buy and share Suzie-Qs or Snickers Bars at home?

Handling a Craving

Once people understand their tendencies with sugar cravings, they may plan for and anticipate the craving—and substitute a more healthy food for when the craving hits. In lieu of sweets with highly processed sugars, they may have small snack packages of dried fruits (raisins, dates, banana chips, or others), fresh fruit, granola bars, nuts, or other foods nearby. Plenty of foods now are created in smaller portions and with lower calories—such as low-fat, low-sugar puddings or healthier yogurts. Others will drink plenty of water to stay hydrated but also to taper off the sugar cravings.

People can train themselves (it is said that all it takes is 21 days of the new habit) to eat right-sized meals at regular times. Some may find that small meals eaten 5 to 6 times a day may work. Skipping meals can lead to dips in sugar, which may be perceived as a sugar craving. Hunger may lead to a loss of control. The regular meals should often contain proteins—and not processed sugars or high-level carbohydrates (which cause sugar spikes and then severe drops—with the drops perceived as hunger cravings). Caffeine consumption may increase stress, too, and lead to an increased hunger for sweets.

Absolute denial of all sweets is not truly possible for most people's daily regimens. Some dietitians suggest that people should

have one treat a day but to limit the caloric intake of that sweet to 100 calories or less; others suggest that one decadent sweet every week should suffice. This involves planning ahead and self-control. Still, this is about tapering off on a habit by lessening the consumption of sugars and bringing in healthier unprocessed or less processed foods. The body should become less addicted to the sugar "high."

Avoiding (Unhealthily Sweet) Temptations

The best-laid plans can go awry if people do not plan ahead. People may try a starvation diet all day but then totally let loose once they get home; they may over-eat and consume many unhealthy sweets. Or people may go shopping while they're hungry and load up on numerous sweets which will be a temptation at any time. Or if people find themselves eating pastries while dining out with friends, then it may be wiser to get friends to be supportive of one's healthy eating endeavors.

Getting Creative about Alternatives

Online, there are many creative alternatives for healthy snacks that involve healthy base fruits (but with a light drizzle of syrup)...that may fulfill the sugar craving. In lieu of pies, people may try fruit crumbles. In lieu of dessert mash-ups, people may have their own low-fat, high-fiber muffins.

A sweet tooth can be retrained to be a "healthy tooth."



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