

Food cravings: What they mean and how to curb them

by Kaiser Permanente

Chewy cookies. Creamy chocolate. Salty chips. Melted cheese. Besides being delicious, these foods have something in common. They're the sugary, salty, or high-fat treats people can get strong urges to eat. [It's OK to occasionally indulge in cravings for these types of foods.](#) But intense food cravings can lead to eating more than what feels comfortable.

What causes food cravings?

There are a wide range of reasons to crave specific foods. Often, cravings can mean your hunger hormones are out of balance, says Candace Morgan, registered dietitian for Kaiser Permanente's regional center of healthy living in Pasadena, California. **These gut hormones can increase or decrease your appetite.** They're affected by lifestyle habits — diet, stress, sleep, and exercise. When your body isn't getting the right amount of sleep, for example, it can change how it releases your hormones. And that can throw off your hunger signals.

If you want to feel more in control of what you eat, a few lifestyle changes may help. Here are 4 tips to help balance your hormones — and curb your food cravings.

Eat earlier in the day

The most common cause of overindulging in cravings isn't **a lack of willpower**. Usually, it's not eating enough earlier in the day, Morgan says. Your body craves sugar when you don't consume enough calories. And that makes it hard to control what — and how much — you eat as the day goes on.

Most people can benefit from eating 3 healthy meals and 1 or 2 snacks each day. Aim to eat breakfast between 60 and 90 minutes after you wake up. **Then, eat every 3 to 4 hours.** Ideally, dinner should be the last thing you eat, so you're not going to bed with high blood sugar.

When planning your meals and snacks, balance whole-grain carbohydrates with lean protein, Morgan says. These nutrients fuel your body's cells and provide you with energy. Include a few servings of foods with healthy fats each day — like olive oil, salmon, flaxseeds, and avocado. **Healthy fats give you energy and help you feel fuller longer.** Also try to include at least one high-fiber food with every meal. Fiber helps control your blood sugar and keep your gut healthy.

Try to find different healthy food options that you enjoy. Depending on what you're craving, Morgan recommends meals and snacks like:

Sweet foods

- Oatmeal with cinnamon, diced apple, walnuts, and shredded coconut
- Whole-grain waffles topped with peanut butter and sliced bananas
- Spinach salad with balsamic vinegar and roasted salmon, carrots, and sweet potato
- Greek yogurt with berries and cacao nibs
- Chocolate chip oat date cookies

Savory foods

- Whole-wheat tortilla with scrambled eggs, sliced avocado, and fresh salsa
- Smoked salmon and goat cheese on a slice of whole-wheat toast
- Baked potato with ground turkey, black beans, salsa, and corn
- Air-popped popcorn sprinkled with nutritional yeast
- Homemade kale chips

Reduce chronic stress

Chronic stress is one of the main factors affecting hunger hormones, Morgan says. Stress becomes chronic when you experience frustration or anxiety for a long period of time — like a difficult job or long-term illness. Stress releases the hormone cortisol, which fires up your appetite. It's part of your body's fight-or-flight

response. Your brain thinks it needs fuel to fight off what's causing your stress. That increases cravings, especially for high-fat, high-calorie foods, Morgan says.

It's not always possible to remove stressors from your life, but you can try to manage stress better. Meditating and breathing exercises can help you stay calm.

Note: If you're stressed because you need help with essentials like housing or utilities, check out these community-based resources.

Get more sleep

If you sleep fewer than 6 hours a night, you'll likely crave sweet, high-calorie foods. **When your body needs sleep, eating sugar is another way for it to get energy**, Morgan says. Lack of sleep can also affect your hormone levels and **increase your appetite**. Aim to get between **7 and 9 hours of sleep a night**. You'll want to go to bed 10 to 15 minutes earlier each night until you hit your target. And when you have time during the day, take a nap.

Increase your exercise

Exercise is beneficial for many reasons — the most important being that it can help you live longer. Research shows that it can also lower your appetite.¹ And in a recent study, strenuous exercise helped mice avoid weight gain. To get the most health benefits, adults should exercise at least 150 minutes a week at a moderate intensity. You may need to do more intense workouts, like strength training, to lower your appetite.

As you work on these lifestyle factors, you may notice how they're each connected. Exercise can lower stress levels and help you sleep. Being well-rested can help you stay calm in stressful situations — and give you more energy to move your body. And as your hormones balance, you may experience fewer food cravings. Keep in mind that hunger is a normal feeling, and you should respond to it in a positive way. It's not healthy to ignore it — or to fill up on empty calories.

So the next time an intense food craving strikes, check in with your body to see what it really needs — like a 20-minute nap or a healthy meal. And maybe a piece of chocolate.