

Combating Cravings

by Jonny Bowden, MA, CNS

Q:

I need ideas on how to curb the [munchies after dinner](#). I usually get the munchies about 9:30 or 10 at night. I am really trying not to eat after 8. Do you have any ideas how to stop cravings?

A:

Cravings are like headaches -- they're caused by so many different sources that it's almost impossible to offer a single solution that will work for everyone.

Where does the craving come from?

- If it's due to [psychological causes](#), such as boredom or anxiety or habit, you may be able to fend it off just by changing activities.
- If you notice that the craving is always linked to a certain activity (such as reading or watching television), try changing your routine -- go for a walk, talk on the phone or just wait it out for 15 minutes. Very often you'll find that the craving has lost a lot of its strength by the time the waiting period is up.
- Some cravings for food are actually thirst in disguise. Since most of us walk around underhydrated, half the time what we perceive as hunger is really thirst. You can test that by drinking a couple of [glasses of water](#), preferably with a slice of lemon, waiting a few minutes and checking to see if you're still hungry.

What do you crave?

- **Sugary foods:** According to both Julia Ross, author of *The Diet Cure*, and Kathleen DesMaisons, author of *Potatoes Not Prozac*, craving mostly sugary foods may well be linked to low levels of serotonin and endorphins. If this applies to you, a diet higher in protein and high-quality fats may help. Try eliminating refined flours, sugar and alcohol. These play havoc with your blood sugar and set you up for cravings, whereas protein, fat and fiber will tend to keep blood sugar levels more even and help keep cravings at bay.
- **Fatty foods:** Your body may be telling you that you are low in essential fatty acids. Try eating more fish, or supplementing your diet with fish oil or flaxseed oil. If you choose the supplement route, make sure you are also taking a multiple vitamin or mineral high in antioxidants such as vitamins E and C and selenium. And while there are many reasons women crave chocolate, one of them may be that it contains magnesium. Since it's been estimated that up to 75 percent of American women are deficient in this mineral, a [magnesium supplement](#) certainly couldn't do any harm.

When do you crave?

Have you ever noticed that foods that seem irresistible at night, such as birthday cake after dinner, don't seem very appealing at eight in the morning? That to me seems like a good argument that it's not the food itself that's calling you, it's your own fluctuations in blood sugar and insulin during the day that make you susceptible by the time evening comes around. How can you smooth out the blood-sugar roller coasters that feed the need for sweets later in the day? Once again, try a diet that's higher in protein, good quality fats, vegetables and the occasional fruit and lower in processed, manufactured junk (commercial cereals, breads and pastas). Chromium supplements may also help.

Though many people recommend dealing with cravings by having "just a little" of the food you crave, this is not always a great idea. While it may work for some, this sets up a cascade of biochemical processes in sugar-sensitive people that invariably translates to an overwhelming desire for more of the same. For sugar-sensitive people, one simple bite of a chocolate chip cookie is almost impossible. It's like an alcoholic having just one drink. Notice, by the way, that it's nearly impossible to binge on steak or buttered broccoli but relatively easy to binge on sugar or starch.

For reasons that are not completely understood, the supplement L-glutamine, an amino acid usually available in powder form, is miraculous for curbing sweet cravings. A spoonful in some water will usually do it.

If you do munch, try to avoid eating carbohydrates by themselves; instead, mix them with some protein and fat, like an apple with a little cheese or some peanut butter. Nuts are also a great snack, but watch the quantity. And although there's no scientific evidence I know of to prove this, many people have reported that snacking on something spicy or sour (a pickle, for example) will knock your [sweet cravings](#) right out of the box. Protein snacks are another option. Think of things like sliced turkey with tomatoes. And most raw vegetables can satisfy your need to munch on something while doing absolutely no damage to your weight loss program.

From a weight-management perspective, the one thing you do not want to do is snack on high-carbohydrate foods before bed. This simply insures that you go to bed with a high circulating level of insulin and virtually guarantees that the body won't burn fat while you sleep.