

# Cravings – ‘I know it’s bad for me, But I want it!’

## Introduction

In this article we will investigate the interesting topic of cravings. A craving is technically defined as an intense desire for some particular thing. An aversion is technically defined as a feeling of intense dislike.

## Cravings

Nutritional cravings are normal bodily responses that can occur at various times in one’s life. A craving is something that we experience and will feel a need to respond to by consuming the specific culprit. A craving can be experienced as slight desire or can in some instances, can initiate addictive tendencies whereby a person feel as though they are unable to function without it.

In a clinical situation I frequently see patients with strong cravings for sugar, chocolate, alcohol, caffeine or fried foods. Each craving indicates an underlying nutritional deficit. I frequently remind patients that whilst they feel that they cannot control their ‘need’ for the food or drink that it may not be because of lack of willpower but that it reflects a nutritional deficit within their diet.

In instances of excessive sugar or chocolate it can often be as simple as increasing ones protein intake. This is especially achievable when consuming foods from the nut/seed families (e.g. 10 almonds or 2 tablespoons of sunflower seeds). This will provide additional supplementation of essential fatty acids which will assist to reduce a person’s anxiety and nervous response.

### Cravings related to specific nutrients

A brief summary of the possible nutritional excesses or deficiencies is listed below. Please consider your own cravings and the possible deficiencies they relate to:

Micronutrient	Craving	Food Sources
B Vitamins	Carbohydrate foods – sugar, grains, white flours	Numerous foods including - Liver, wheat germ, asparagus, lettuce, dark leafy green vegetables, lentils, legumes, orange juice, legumes, broccoli, nuts and seeds, wholegrains
Vitamin C	Caffeinated foods/beverages due to stress response	Red chilli, guava, red capsicum, Brussels sprouts, citrus juice concentrate, papayas, kale, parsley, collards, kiwi fruit, blackcurrants, mango, cabbage, broccoli, strawberries, lychees, oranges, sprouts, lemons, tangerines, honeydew melon, spinach, tomatoes
Vitamin A	Protein rich foods	Liver and organ meats, cod liver oil, liver sausage, pate, poultry, cornmeal, cream, cheese, egg yolks
Essential Fatty Acids and Vitamin E	Fatty foods	Vitamin E - Wheatgerm and wheatgerm oil, soybean oil, almonds, sunflower seeds, walnuts, cashews, avocado, brown rice Essential Fatty Acids – Oils, nuts, seeds, fish, avocado
Calcium	Dairy products, Carbonated beverages	Whitebait, cheese, tinned salmon, tinned sardines, yoghurt and milk, tofu, legumes, dark green leafy vegetables, tahini, almonds, parsley, sesame seeds, globe artichokes, sprouts, wholegrain wheat
Magnesium	Chocolate, sugar/carbohydrates	Millet, wholegrains, lima beans, green leafy vegetables, muesli, almonds, cashews, all legumes, buckwheat, corn, avocado, potato with skin, garlic, blackberries, eggplant, tomato, cabbage, grapes, pineapple, mushrooms
Zinc	Alcohol, metal substances, dairy to buffer metallic taste, carbohydrates	Oysters, shellfish and fish, red meat, popcorn, sesame seeds, sunflower, seeds, pepitas, walnuts, almonds, muesli, dahl, wheatgerm, tomato sauce and paste, ginger root, pecans, wholegrains, sardines, split peas

<b>Micronutrient</b>	<b>Craving</b>	<b>Food Sources</b>
Iron	Dirt, clay, ice or animal protein (meat)	Liver and organ meats, red meats, oysters, mussels, enriched cereals, molasses, green leafy vegetables, tomato paste, dahl, dried apricots, prune juice, baked beans, Jerusalem artichokes, sardines, beef, almonds, walnuts, sesame seeds, pecans, lentils
<b>Macronutrient</b>	<b>Craving</b>	<b>Food Source</b>
Carbohydrates	Sugar, Caffeine e.g. lollies, sweet treats	Wholegrains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds
Protein	Sugar, Caffeine e.g. chocolate	Animal protein – Meat, fish, eggs, dairy Vegetarian protein – Pulses, nuts, seeds, grains
Lipids (Fat)	Salted, fried foods e.g. potato chips	Essential Fatty Acids – Oils, nuts, seeds, fish, avocado

## Psychological responses

A craving for a food is something that can be easily interfered with. We can control our thoughts, distract ourselves, ignore them or we can indulge them. This suggests that one's ability to control the impulse of a craving is governed by the information and communication within our brains. This is controlled by wonderful brain chemicals known as neurotransmitters.

### Neurotransmitters

Neurotransmitters are chemicals that regulate many body responses such as appetite, mood, sleep/wake cycle and temperature. The most interesting feature of the neurotransmitters is that each and every pathway of their production and utilisation is dependant on numerous nutrients including protein, B vitamins, Magnesium and Zinc. As such, deficiencies in any nutrient will affect their successful roles in the human body – especially in one's regulation of appetite and satiety.

A brief summary of the neurotransmitters is listed below:

#### Dopamine

- Involved in emotional responses and addictive behaviours, regulates skeletal muscle tone and some movement
- Dopamine and its related catecholamines generally have a stimulatory activity on the brain and cardiovascular system, whilst in the gastrointestinal system they generally induce inhibition.

#### Serotonin

- Sensory perception, control of mood, temperature regulation, appetite regulation, & induction of sleep

#### Norepinephrine (noradrenalin)

- Regulates mood, dreaming, awakening from deep sleep

#### Epinephrine (adrenalin)

- Initiates stress response - enables us to run away from the chasing lion!

#### Endorphins

- Induce pain relief, mood elevation, stress-relief, optimism and euphoria.
- For example - phenylalanine is the precursor to phenylethylamine which is naturally produced in the brain when we are in love. This chemical is also stimulated when we eat chocolate – One of the reasons why people are so addicted to it!

#### Acetylcholine

- Acetylcholine is the most widespread neurotransmitter chemical in the brain and body and is required for normal central and peripheral nerve function.

#### GABA (Amino Acid)

- Inhibitory neurotransmitter – sedates and relaxes

## Conclusion

Naturopathic nutritionists refer to cravings frequently and place great importance on their relevance to patient care. When considering cravings, it is important to acknowledge their biochemical and psychological causes. Whilst someone may be craving chocolate simply as a comfort food, it is important to acknowledge that this craving also has biochemical causes and thus possible biochemical treatments.

The human body is truly amazing. It gives us messages to indicate our health on a daily basis. The difficulty lies in the interpretation of that message. For example, if we consider a Magnesium deficiency, a typical deficiency sign is a craving for chocolate. The difficulty is that one needs to have acquired the knowledge of that meaning to understand that if one supplements with Magnesium (both dietary and/or supplemental) that the craving is ameliorated very quickly. The average person thinks 'my body wants chocolate so I'll eat some', however, it is ideal to understand the craving rather than to simply indulge it.

Some people find that it isn't simply *some* chocolate but rather that they need to consume *copious quantities* to initiate relief and a sense of satiety. When nutritional deficiencies are at their worst, some individuals may find that quantities far exceed their *normal* intake - some people may even consume 3 *blocks* of chocolate. This is obviously indicative of an addictive cycle and suggests that the nutritional deficiency may not be rectified by dietary modifications alone. Nutritional supplementation is an extremely valuable treatment option; however, to rectify a nutritional imbalance, a qualified practitioner should be consulted to ensure that nutritional balance and therapeutic outcomes are achieved.

Next time you reach for a craving, you may just find that your diet is missing a key nutritional ingredient. A balanced healthy diet is clearly the easiest way to eliminate feeling out of control with food and will assist in modulating one's mood and general wellbeing.

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