

Let's talk  
**family**

# Kick it to the **curb**

Food cravings getting the better of you? They might not only point to your love of the naughty stuff, but an underlying emotional issue, too

**I**f you reach for dessert right after you've had a meal, or scrounge around for something sweet or salty in the middle of the night, you're giving into a craving - not just eating because you're hungry. If this sounds like you, you might be an emotional eater. Eating foods that are high in carbohydrates or sweet or salty snacks has an impact on your hormone levels, just like exercising or relaxing does. And for most of us, it's easier to give into these foods than recognise what emotions trigger our cravings, and work through them.



## HUNGER CRAVINGS VS EMOTIONAL CRAVINGS

Nathalie Mat, a registered dietician and spokesperson for the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA) explains that it's important to differentiate between cravings that relate to hunger, and cravings that relate to emotions. 'If you get a craving for a specific food and nothing else will satisfy your craving, it's possible that you're experiencing an emotional craving.'

Xolisile Dube, who's also a registered dietician and spokesperson for ADSA, says for some people, compulsive eating is related to deficiencies in neurotransmitters, and if you lack serotonin or dopamine, (the feel-food hormones) or one of the other essential chemical communicators in your brain, the resulting behaviour is a craving for carbohydrates, especially sugar and bread products. 'When we're feeling down, stressed or bored, we often turn to food for comfort. Though this

is natural, if psychological problems trigger food cravings frequently, things can quickly spiral out of control. In severe cases, food cravings could evolve into episodes of binge eating, drastic weight gain, eating disorders and further emotional issues,' Xolisile says.

**The first step to curbing your cravings is to determine why you're eating. Figure out if you're eating to fill an emotional void, or if you're eating because you're actually hungry. This list explains the differences between emotional hunger and physical hunger:**

- ✓ Emotional hunger comes on suddenly, while physical hunger comes on gradually.
- ✓ Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly, while physical hunger can wait.
- ✓ Emotional hunger craves specific comfort foods, whereas physical hunger is open to options.
- ✓ Emotional hunger isn't satisfied with

a full stomach, whereas physical hunger stops when you're full.

- ✓ Emotional eating triggers feelings of guilt, powerlessness and shame, but eating to satisfy physical hunger doesn't make you feel bad about yourself.

If you've noticed that your eating patterns stem from emotional eating, then its best to sit down and look at what your triggers are, so you can combat the habit. 'Try skipping foods that create a spike in our feel-good hormone for two weeks and your cravings will greatly decrease', advises Nathalie.

Xolisile cautions that this won't be an easy process as you will go through a withdrawal process, 'but it's critical that you stick to it if you want to kick the habit'.

If you can't stop giving into your cravings, seek professional help – you don't want to end up over eating and gaining weight, as this will result in a deeper dissatisfaction with yourself, leading to greater emotional issues.

## CHECKLIST: COMBAT YOUR CRAVINGS!

### ✓ Restrict your sugar and salt intake

Sugar and salt in moderation are okay, but consuming either of them too often is a recipe for disaster. Try to restrict your intake, don't get into the habit of adding salt to every meal or sugar to every drink, and don't exceed the recommended daily allowance.

### ✓ Say no to processed foods

Even though they're tasty and convenient, they're packed with extra salt, fat, sugar and chemicals. It's not healthy to rely too heavily on these foods as your key dietary source, and the hidden sugar and salt can trigger cravings.

### ✓ Exercise

Exercising reduces stress hormones, such as cortisol, and increases mood-boosting hormones, such as endorphins. When we exercise, endorphins are released into the bloodstream with other feel-good hormones like serotonin, dopamine and adrenaline, which uplift us emotionally,

decreasing the need for quick pick-me-ups, like junk food.

### ✓ Keep a food journal

Note your cravings, what they are, when you crave them, how long it takes for you to give in to them and how you feel at that time. Take this to a dietician who will help you build a picture of your eating habits, and develop a nutrition programme that's tailored to your needs.

### ✓ Eat regularly

When you don't eat regularly, your blood sugar drops. This results in food cravings and overeating. Eating regularly could also help increase the efficiency of your metabolism.

### ✓ Opt for low-GI foods

Glycemic Index, or GI, is the term used to describe the different effects carbohydrates have on the body, by ranking them according to the effects they have on blood glucose levels. High GI foods are absorbed quickly into the blood stream and raise blood sugar levels so high that the body overreacts

and depresses the levels below normal. The fluctuations can cause cravings, a loss of appetite and mood swings. To avoid these side effects, it's best to consume as few high-GI products as possible as this will ensure there are only minimal fluctuations in blood glucose levels.

### ✓ Trick your mind

You can trick yourself into thinking that you're satisfying a craving. Crunchy foods like chips are often eaten during times of stress, because the crunching can help soothe the nervous system. If you're craving something crunchy, rather opt for vegetables like carrot sticks or celery.

Curbing your food cravings isn't an easy thing to do, especially if your eating habits are emotionally related. Xolisile says that when a craving settles in you should always remind yourself that your body doesn't need this food. You've conditioned yourself to crave this food, so you can condition yourself not to. 