



Wish you could wave a magic wand and make them disappear? Nutrition editor **Emma Stirling** explains how to stay satisfied – and on track – with a few simple strategies.

curb your cravings

Often it starts in the mid-afternoon, when you pass a bus ad or enter a movie theatre. Even if you've just had a big meal, that craving for something hits you hard and fast. But what's really going on when our body cries out for a specific food? And what can you do to curb cravings and stick to your healthy new year eating goals? Understanding what's happening – and finding healthier alternatives – is the first step to winning the battle.

The chemistry of cravings

Nutrition scientists have long been intrigued by food cravings, defined as the strong desire to eat a food you haven't had for a while. Anxiety, boredom, loneliness, fatigue and that time of the month are just some of the emotional, and hormonal, states believed to trigger cravings. There's also a complex interaction of biochemical factors at play, the pieces of which are still somewhat of a puzzle. Plus, cravings commonly appear when people are suddenly deprived of favourite foods, such as on some faddish food plans.

97% of women experience food cravings, according to the *Journal of Nutrition*. For men it's 68%

It has been suggested that blood sugar imbalances are the foundation for some cravings, and that they may be a result of nutrient deficiencies. However, such research is inconclusive. Recognising the desire for pleasurable moods and experiences is the real key to curbing your cravings for good. The chances are you're hooked on a feeling, not on a particular food. Over time, your brain and body has become accustomed to these repetitive food-mood links. The great news? There are a range of ways to replicate this feel-good state without sabotaging your weight-loss efforts.

Satisfy your hunger

Mostly, true hunger is the last thing driving your craving, but it's important to recognise the signs. If you've skipped a meal or snack, you may simply be getting ravenous. Try satisfying your craving with a naturally sweet piece of fruit first. Fresh fruit is a filling food and has a lower energy density than many other snacks, which means it has fewer kilojoules for the same weight. You may need to control hunger pangs by eating six small meals a day at intervals of three hours.

Boost your mood

Often we believe that if we eat a chocolate bar, we'll feel better. And this can be true, in the short term. At other times, the feel-good factor rebounds and you're left with guilt and remorse. If you find yourself regularly craving a chocolate pick-me-up, look to other healthy mood boosters. Tryptophan – an amino acid involved in the production of

serotonin – is high in chicken, brown rice and cashews. High intensity exercise produces feel-good endorphins, and getting adequate sleep helps control stress levels.

Out of sight, out of mind

When people have a food craving, they see vivid images of the desired food and crave it with equal or greater intensity. More importantly, researchers at Flinders University have found that interfering with the cognitive processes used to create such craving-related images may help to reduce their incidence. So, aim to break any existing connections you have with common craving cues. Treat yourself to a magazine, not a chocolate bar, when checking out at the supermarket. At home, keep treats out of the pantry.

When a craving hits, try and substitute it with a healthier version that provides the same satisfaction with fewer kilojoules. If you regularly crave something chocolaty, switch to a low-fat, low-sugar treat. Instead of that huge chocolate muffin, carry a Weight Watchers Café Cookie in your handbag. Got a taste for something crunchy? Air-popped popcorn with a shake of Mexican spice cuts the kilojoules in a bag of cheese corn chips to next to nothing.

Indulge wisely

One of the best approaches is to give yourself permission to have a regular, small amount of the food you crave. In this way you're less likely to binge on the whole pack of Tim Tams. Don't label any kind of food as forbidden, as that will only make you desire it more – and feel worse for eating it. Instead, practice flexible restraint. As your weight-loss journey continues, you'll soon feel in control and completely hooked on being fitter and healthier. [www](http://www.weightwatchers.com.au)

TOP 5 CRAVINGS CURES

When your healthy eating and exercise plan is on track and a craving still decides to call, try these:

- 1 Distract yourself by going for a walk, getting outside, enjoying a relaxing bath, downloading some music or calling a friend.
- 2 Keep a note in a journal or your **POINTS** tracker when you crave something. It might be the key to unlocking a craving pattern.
- 3 Find some alternatives for TV time, like drawing or sewing, and if you really need a sweet treat go for a small lollipop that lasts for longer.
- 4 Eat a breath mint, brush your teeth or gargle some mouthwash. The clean minty feeling can help wash away the desire for food.
- 5 Buy individually wrapped, portion-controlled treats such as a single Lindt Ball, rather than a whole block, Freddo Frog or mini ice-cream tub.