

# How to Resist Junk Food Cravings

Just because that bag of chips is calling your name doesn't mean you have to answer. Read on to silence your cravings and ramp up your willpower.



By Sara Reistad-Long

## No More Excuses

**Old Excuse:** "If I deprive myself now, I'll just eat more later."

**New Mantra:** "I'm making a choice, not a sacrifice."

We tend to want what we can't have. But when it comes to cravings, not getting what you want can dampen your desire. "Studies show that we crave what we eat," says Stephanie Middleberg, RD, a nutritionist in New York City. "So if you eat good-for-you foods, you'll start wanting them instead of cookies and cake." The key is getting your mind on board until your body can take over.

Smart strategy: Reframe the story. "Depriving yourself is about resisting, and resistance is difficult. Choosing whether to eat something, on the other hand, is empowering," says Michelle May, MD, the author of *Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat*. So instead of trying to defeat a craving, put it on the back burner until you've fit in a workout or finished dinner. "That way you can indulge, but in your own time and on your own terms," says Keri Gans, RD, the author of *The Small Change Diet*. The tactic may also help you eat less: A study found that people who were told to put off eating chocolate consumed less than those who were told to eat it immediately. The researchers believe that when you wait to indulge, you're probably in less of an impulsive mind-set and in more of a reflective, ready-to-savor one.

**Old Excuse:** "I deserve a treat after the kind of day I've had." **New Mantra:** "I deserve kindness, not calories."

Sure, satisfying a craving can give you a quick hit of the pleasure hormone dopamine (and if you're doing it with carbs, a rush of calming serotonin too). But research shows that chocolate's comforting effect lasts only three minutes. And once the high passes, you're left with the same frustrations as before -- plus regret.

Smart strategy: Verbalize what's making you feel lousy. While emotional eating can add to your woes by pushing up your pants size, "pinpointing your problems is the first step to resolving them," says Jean Fain, a psychotherapist and the author of *The Self-Compassion Diet*. Give yourself a few minutes to write about a problem in an email, then read what you've written and delete the draft; according to research published in *Psychological Science*, virtually throwing away your woes makes it easier to let them go in real life.

If you still can't stop thinking about what went wrong, do something soothing that doesn't involve consuming calories, like taking a walk. Or snuggle with a pet or a loved one, a proven way to make stress hormones plummet and the feel-good chemical oxytocin spike. Whatever you do, don't get hung up on the past: A study from Wake Forest University found that dieters who didn't beat themselves up over a perceived failure ate less candy than those who were self-critical.

**Old Excuse:** "It's a special occasion."

**New Mantra:** "Special doesn't mean stuffed."

"It would be crazy to pass up a piece of your own birthday cake," Gans says. But that doesn't mean you have to eat a ginormous slice -- or two.

Smart strategy: The satisfaction you get from any one food often drops off with every bite, and research shows that small portions can be as satisfying as large ones. So if the situation merits a calorie-packed treat, try eating just a few forkfuls, and give them your full attention: Scientists at the University of Birmingham in England concluded that focusing on what you're eating helps you consume fewer calories later on. And remember that you'll have a lot more fun if you feel sated, not stuffed. "You want to experience what's happening to the fullest, and being in a food coma makes that difficult," Fain says.

**Old Excuse:** "I need to listen to my body, and it wants ice cream."

**New Mantra:** "What I want isn't necessarily what I need."

Think of your body as if it were a baby monitor: You should pay close attention to it, but you don't have to stop what you're doing each time it rumbles. "While hunger is your body telling you that you need to eat, cravings are a suggestion, not an order," says Susan Albers, a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic and the author of *Eat.Q*. Smart strategy: Start by determining whether you're actually hungry. Aside from the obvious symptoms like fatigue and irritability, pickiness is also a good indicator of appetite. The less you care about eating a specific food and the more you just want to eat something, the likelier it is that you don't have just a hankering.

If it is only a craving (for example, you would kill for a cookie but could easily pass on an apple), make yourself a cup of jasmine green tea and take a big whiff of it before you sip. In recent studies, women who smelled jasmine were able to significantly reduce their chocolate cravings. Or use your imagination: Other research has shown that visualizing yourself eating your favorite food can tamp down your desire for it by tricking your brain into thinking you've already indulged.

**Old Excuse:** "I've been really good lately."

**New Mantra:** "I've been feeling really good lately, and I want to keep it that way."

"When you use food as a prize, you risk sabotaging your motivation by signaling to yourself that you've reached an end point; you got the medal, so the race is over," Albers says. "This can be an open invitation to revert to unhealthy behaviors."

Smart strategy: Rather than rewarding yourself for a job well done, focus on how eating healthfully has already paid off. Do you have more energy? Do your clothes fit better? Then take a moment to let the emotions that come with that benefit sink in. Why? In the same way you can get addicted to the endorphins your body releases when you work up a sweat, "you can get hooked on the feeling of pride or progress, which makes you want to continue down a healthy path," Dr. Colbert says.

**Old Excuse:** "If that skinny girl can eat a brownie sundae, so can I."

**New Mantra:** "I need to eat what's right for me."

Everyone has a thin friend or coworker who seems to live on junk food and lots of it. And because studies have found that women tend to eat more when they're together, you probably want what she's having every time you two go out to lunch.

"Imitating other people, or 'social modeling,' is how we learn to navigate the world almost from the time we're born, and it's a hard habit to break," says Sonali Sharma, MD, a psychiatrist in New York City. But as tempting as it is to imagine that your friend has discovered some kind of fifth dimension for dieters, whatever is going on with her probably doesn't translate. "Maybe she has a fast metabolism or spends hours in the gym every day," Dr. Sharma explains.

Smart strategy: According to a study in the *American Journal of Public Health*, having a healthy role model can play a key part in helping you stick to your diet and exercise plan. So think of someone, whether it's a celebrity or a

friend, whose eating habits you aspire to. (Skip the pin-thin actress who subsists on diet soda alone and instead choose a woman who has professed her love for pizza but limits herself to two slices.) Then, rather than matching Ms. Sky- High Metabolism bite for bite, think, *What would my health hero do?* and act accordingly.

**Old Excuse:** "I'll work it off later."

**New Mantra:** "I'll work out now and treat myself later."

When you're faced with a cupcake in all its frosted deliciousness, more time at the gym might seem like a reasonable trade-off. The problem is that "we're all optimists when it comes to our future selves," Dr. Colbert says. "But diets run on momentum. It's easier to eat well when you're feeling successful and seeing results than it is when you're trying to compensate for a transgression."

Smart strategy: Pound the pavement first and see if you still want that treat afterward. According to a study from Brigham Young University, women had less of an appetite after exercise, which may lower levels of the hunger hormone ghrelin.

*Originally published in FITNESS magazine, April 2014.*