

Good Food

Conquer Your Cravings

Where they come from—and what to eat instead

BY KELSEY KLOSS

FOOD CRAVINGS arrive unexpectedly and without subtlety. You catch a glimpse of cheesy pizza or remember the chocolate chip cookies your mother used to bake, and soon you can think of nothing other than indulging in that food.

Experts believe a complicated web of stimuli, memories, cultural influences, and hormones causes us to crave certain flavors and textures. Genetics also plays a role: A new Danish study found that people with one of two variants of a certain gene are more likely to have a sweet tooth than those who don't have the variant. But there's no consensus on how important each of these factors is.

One thing we do know about why certain foods are commonly desired: When the brain detects sugar, protein, or fat, it releases reward signals.

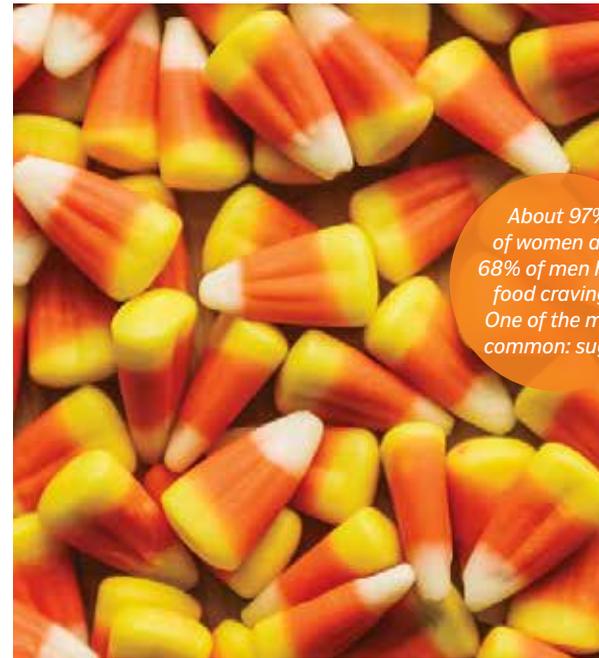
"There are evolutionary reasons these macronutrients are all craved, because they're things humans need," says Marcia Pelchat, a food cravings researcher emerita at the Monell Chemical Senses Center. "Early humans did well to eat them because their diet would be deficient in calories otherwise." In the distant past, there were also fewer sources of empty calories, so these cravings likely encouraged our ancestors to eat natural sugars, lean protein, and healthy fats, found in foods such as berries, fish, and avocado. Today, cravings lead us to candy, burgers, and fries.

But they don't have to. If you struggle with cravings, these expert-approved tips can help you feel satisfied with healthier choices.

Sugar

WHAT YOU WANT: Cake, candy, chocolate

WHY YOU CRAVE IT: Because sugar is a quickly digested carbohydrate, it provides a fast burst of energy and feel-good reward signals when you eat it—one reason you crave it when you're tired or stressed.



About 97% of women and 68% of men have food cravings. One of the most common: sugar.

that cue reward signals when you eat foods rich in umami, which is why a sizzling steak might seem appetizing. "Cross-culturally, most people like the taste of umami," says Thomas Finger, codirector of the Rocky Mountain Taste and Smell Center at the University of Colorado, Denver. Lean sources of protein quell this desire with fewer calories. **HAVE THIS INSTEAD:** Chicken breast, eggs, quinoa cooked in beef broth

Fat

WHAT YOU WANT: French

fries, pizza, potato chips
WHY YOU CRAVE IT: Fat serves as backup fuel when carbs aren't available, and it helps the body absorb nutrients. As with sugar, you may crave it as a booster when you're feeling stressed.

"High-fat foods are very rewarding because they cause a release of dopamine [the brain chemical that plays a role in reward-motivated behavior]," says J. Daniel Ragland, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of California, Davis. You can satisfy the craving with healthy fats, which can benefit your brain and heart. If you crave cheese, swap mild varieties for more flavorful types to get more taste from a smaller amount.

HAVE THIS INSTEAD: Peanut butter, guacamole, homemade pizza with feta

But eating certain added sugars, such as table sugar or high fructose corn syrup, can inhibit the circulation of satiety hormones—meaning you'll want to keep eating after your first fix. "If you eat more natural sources of sugar, most of your sweet cravings will likely go away," says Elisabetta Politi, a registered dietitian at Duke Diet and Fitness Center.

HAVE THIS INSTEAD: Berries with yogurt, dried fruit, unsweetened cacao nibs

Protein

WHAT YOU WANT: Bacon, cheeseburgers, steak

WHY YOU CRAVE IT: Meats have umami (a Japanese word that's often translated as *savory*), which signals the presence of amino acids that make up protein. Your taste buds have amino acid receptors

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