

+CONQUER YOUR CRAVINGS

9 WAYS TO CONQUER YOUR CRAVINGS

By Dr. Daniel Amen

Cravings can be the culprit that derails your good intentions to stick with a brain healthy program. Here are 9 simple changes you can make to your daily habits to get better control of your cravings.

1. **Keep your blood sugar balanced.**

Low blood sugar levels are associated with lower overall brain activity, including lower activity in the PFC, the brain's brake. Low brain activity here means more cravings and more bad decisions. Low blood sugar levels can make you feel hungry, irritable, or anxious—all of which make you more likely to make poor choices.

Here are tips to keep your blood sugar levels even throughout the day so you can reduce cravings and boost your self-control.

- **Consider taking the supplements alpha-lipoic acid and chromium.** They both have very good scientific evidence that they help balance blood sugar levels and can help with cravings.
- **Eat a nutritious breakfast every day.** Eating a nutrient-rich breakfast helps get your blood sugar off to a good start and can help keep it balanced for hours so you don't get hungry before lunchtime. Studies show that people who maintain weight loss eat a healthy breakfast.
- **Add a dash of cinnamon.** This fragrant spice has been found to help regulate blood sugar levels in people with type 2 diabetes.
- **Have smaller meals throughout the day.** Big meals send your blood sugar skyrocketing only to plummet later on. Eating smaller meals helps eliminate the blood sugar rollercoaster ride that can impact your emotions and increase your cravings.
- **Stay away from simple sugars and refined carbohydrates.** Things like candy, potatoes, white bread, pretzels, sodas, sweetened fruit juices, and alcohol cause your blood sugar to spike and then drop, so you feel great for a short while and then you feel stupid and hungry. Be very careful with high-fat, high-sugar, high-calorie foods because they work on the morphine or heroin centers of the brain and can be addictive.

2. **Decrease the artificial sweeteners.**

If you really want to decrease your cravings, you have to get rid of the artificial sweeteners in your diet. We think of these sweeteners as free, because they have no calories, but because they are up to 600 times sweeter than sugar, they may activate the appetite centers of the brain making you crave even more food and more sugar.

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3. Manage your stress.

Chronic stress has been associated with increased appetite, sugar and fat cravings, and abdominal obesity, as well as low energy, poor concentration, elevated cholesterol levels, heart disease, and hypertension, as well as an increased risk for strokes, diabetes (reduced sensitivity to insulin), muscle wasting, osteoporosis, anxiety, depression, irregular menstrual periods, lowered libido, and decreased fertility. To decrease your cravings, get on a daily stress-management program.

Practice deep-breathing exercises to help you manage your stress.

4. Outsmart sneaky triggers.

To control your cravings, you have to control your triggers. Know the people, places, and things that fuel your cravings and plan ahead for your vulnerable times. For example, I take a snack with me when I go to the movies so I am not tempted by the popcorn and licorice.

5. Find out about hidden food allergies.

Hidden food allergies and food sensitivities can trigger cravings. For example, did you know that if you have wheat gluten or milk allergies and you eat wheat or dairy products, it can reduce blood flow to the brain and decrease your judgment? That makes you more likely to give in to your cravings. In addition, many of the symptoms associated with food allergies, such as headaches, sleep problems, lack of concentration, and anxiety, can increase stress and cravings.

One of the things that might surprise you about hidden food allergies is that the foods you are allergic to are often the ones you crave the most. It seems counterintuitive, but it is true. So if you have a sensitivity to chocolate, that may be part of the explanation why you crave it. A sensitivity to gluten could make you crave bread, muffins, and other baked goods. I often order a delayed food allergy test, called IgG, on my patients. If you suspect food allergies ask your doctor to test you for it or try an elimination diet.

A good reference for the elimination diet process is *A Fast, Easy Allergy Diet for Behavior and Activity Problems* by my friend Dr. Doris Rapp. You can download the diet at www.drrapp.com for \$7.99.

6. Practice willpower to retrain your brain.

Willpower is like a muscle. You have to use it or lose it. Self-control is very important if you want to lose weight and gain control of your life, happiness, and even intelligence. To pump up your willpower, you need to practice it. Make it a habit to say no to the things that are not good for you and over time, you will find it easier to do.

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7. **Get moving.**

Scientific research has found that physical activity can cut cravings whether you crave sugary snacks or things like cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs. A 2009 study in the journal *Appetite* showed that cravings for chocolate decreased following a 15-minute brisk walk. Instead of immediately giving in to your cravings or focusing on how much you want something, get moving if at all possible.

8. **Get adequate sleep.**

Have you ever noticed that after a night with almost no sleep, you wake up ravenously hungry and want to eat anything and everything in sight? That is because lack of sleep increases food cravings. An expanding body of scientific evidence has shown that the less sleep you get, the more cravings you have, the more calories you eat, the more belly fat you have, and the higher your BMI.

9. **Take natural supplements for craving control.**

N-acetyl-cysteine, alpha-lipoic acid, chromium, dl-phenylalanine, and l-glutamine are five natural supplements that can help take the edge off cravings.