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Break the Sugar Fix

Why is it that when you are under stress or on a tight deadline, you start to crave sugary foods? We all experience this in different ways. Some of us crave chocolate, some sugary tea or coffee.

When we feel stressed in one area of our life, it starts to trickle into all areas. One of the first areas to be neglected is our diets. Our normally controlled behaviours end up being replaced by impulse cravings and bursts of sugar or fat binges.

First, let's get one thing straight; you will never be able to eliminate sugar entirely from your diet, no matter how hard you try. It's easy to spot foods that

contain sugar, like your can of coke, jelly beans and chocolate bars. Most people don't realise though, that many 'healthy' looking foods such as pasta sauces, yoghurt and breads contain sugar.

By consuming foods high in hidden sugars, you are making it harder for you to lose weight and also are possibly feeding the stress cycle. Unlike the natural sugars found in fruit, the added sugars in certain foods are devoid of any fibre, nutrients or vitamins.

Do you ever notice that if you have a craving for a chocolate bar and you give in to the temptation, you end up craving more of it, even the following day? The reason for this is that the sugar and chemicals in the chocolate change the way your body processes food. The food is digested a lot faster into your system, which causes a spike in your blood glucose. This in turn leads to the pancreas pumping out loads of insulin. This then leads to your blood glucose levels plunging back down, which can signal your body to crave eating again.

When we skip meals also, our blood sugar levels drop and we don't get the balance of nutrients needed to keep our energy levels up. And so the cycle of craving begins!

These rapid fluctuations of blood-sugar levels are not only unhealthy for your body, but also place a lot of stress on the body and can depress the immune system. This is not something you want to be doing if you are already in a stressed state. Continual abuse of sugar can lead to type 2 diabetes and obesity.

With a few simple changes we can get a handle on our diets when we are stressed out. We need to be prepared with snacks and easy-to-make meal plans, so we can still eat a balanced diet and not skip meals.

To get a balanced meal to counteract any cravings, eat a combination of whole wheat breads or pasta with vegetables and a portion of good quality protein (lean fat meats, dairy and beans or lentils). Aim to eat a few portions of fruit a day for fibre and also to help any sugar cravings.

It's natural to feel hungry between meals, so still have snacks. Just be wary of snacking when you are not really hungry but are really after an energy boost. Eating sugary foods can lead to a small energy boost, but then can also leave you feeling worse when your blood sugar level drops again a short while later. Keep a stash of mixed nuts or sultanas on hand when feeling peckish, but also head out for a brisk walk or do some sort of activity in place of needing that sugar fix.

If you find it hard to substitute your favourite comfort foods, try for just a taste of the food of choice to satisfy the craving. Have on hand only small portions and discipline yourself to be happy with that portion. Your body will thank you for the lesser kilojoules and also the reduced spike in blood sugar level.

Interestingly, some research by a team from the University of Cincinnati found that rats who consumed sweet drinks had lower levels of a stress-related hormone. The researchers had given three groups of rats either a sugary drink, an artificially sweetened drink or water twice a day. It was found that the rats that had consumed the sugar drink had lower stress hormone levels than those that drank the water. They concluded that the sugar drinks, not the artificially sweetened drinks, were better 'self-medications' for the

two most common types of stress - psychological and physical. However, Amanda Johnson, a dietician with the British Dietetic Association comments: "It is unlikely that simply eating sugary foods will alleviate the symptoms of stress in humans."

Excessive intake of sugary foods can lead to a high energy intake which, as mentioned, can contribute to obesity and type 2 diabetes. Moderation seems to be the key in being able to 'self medicate' and also leading a healthy lifestyle.

In addition to the research, make your focus to eat a balanced diet and stay physically active. Still enjoy your favourite snacks occasionally, but try and limit yourself to once a week to indulge. The longer you keep this up, the less you will crave the food. When you feel the urge to eat the sugary snack, have an alternative activity on hand such as getting up from your desk and going for a brisk walk; or, if in front of the TV, try nursing a cup of hot herbal tea to occupy your hands and satisfy the need to snack. By starting to eliminate a few sugary foods from your diet, you will start to feel an increase in energy and less stress as your body functions better. The long term gain will far outweigh the urge to snack, and it will help you through those stressful times.

By Nalisha Patel



Sugary bits. . .

- 1 Stress tends to bring out sugar cravings in the best of us, but too much sugar has detrimental effects on our general health.
- 2 Sugar can chemically alter the way our body processes food and leave us craving more.
- 3 Substitutes for sugar cravings can be doing physical activity or snacking on natural sugars found in fruit.
- 4 Even though the Cincinnati study found that sugar helped reduce stress hormones in rats, a moderate intake of sugar is highly recommended for humans.

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