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Ask the Dietitian: February 2013

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By **Capt. Mary Staudter, Tripler Army Medical Center Nutrition Care Division**Like [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

"Is it possible to be addicted to food?"

Why is it that the piece of chocolate cake sitting in front of you is so tempting ... maybe even to the point that it is the only thing you can think about?

Scientific evidence supports that food, particularly high-sugar, high-fat food, can alter brain chemistry when eaten. These foods may cause an increase in your body's dopamine response, similar to that of sex and, to a lesser extent, like many addictive drugs.

This response may leave you always wanting more and is likely a large part of what makes eating so pleasurable, a necessary component of human survival.

However, more often than not, we are exposed to too many calories, and the high level of processing, with excessive amounts of sugar, fat, and salt, may exaggerate our chemical response to such foods.

Dr. David Kessler discusses this phenomenon in his book, "The End of Overeating." He suggests that in order to distance ourselves from these highly 'addictive' foods, we need to start by decreasing the value we place on them.

The ultimate goal is to get to the point in which you look at that piece of chocolate cake or that double cheeseburger meal and think, "Ugh, that doesn't even sound good. I don't like that food because it makes me sick."

Perhaps we can start this transition by setting up the environments that we can control (like our kitchens) appropriately. Try to find healthier alternatives for the foods that you crave, and keep these foods front and center in your kitchen.

Stock up on fruit, yogurt, dark chocolate (small pieces), sugar-free pudding and fruit bars to curb that sweet tooth. Appease your salty cravings with air-popped popcorn, edamame, pretzels and hummus, or a small serving of nuts.

Finding healthy alternatives satisfies your cravings without feeling deprived.

Set yourself up for success also by eating small, well-balanced meals and snacks, and drinking adequately throughout the day. Controlling stress and shooting for seven-eight hours of sleep per night may also play a significant role in managing hunger and cravings.

Next time you feel a craving coming on, try to go out for a walk instead. Your body's release of endorphins from the physical exertion just may be enough to take your mind off of food.

Bottom line: you are not alone if you feel that your food has a stronghold on you. Don't beat yourself up about it, but act now (starting in your own kitchen) and gain some of that control back!

(Editor's Note: Ask the Dietitian is a monthly column. Have a question? Email mary.staudter@us.army.mil.)

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