





Can you CONQUER YOUR CRAVINGS?

Yes! Says Karen Fittall, who has sought out expert advice on overcoming yearnings for chocolate, chips, biscuits ... and more.

Science says

Cravings are defined as a 'strong desire for a particular food' – as opposed to general hunger, when any type of food will fit the bill. When they hit – and many of us experience them frequently – cravings can seem like an unstoppable force. This is all perfectly normal, say the experts, with research showing that as many as 97 per cent of women and 68 per cent of men experience food cravings. Females aged between 18 and 35 have been found to be particularly susceptible.

The big question is why? Dr Peta Stapleton from Queensland's Griffith University is undertaking a study investigating how to overcome food cravings, and says there are likely to be a number of things at work. "There's no one answer. Certain physiological and hormonal factors have been shown to have a role, then there

are psychological aspects to consider. Then there's the fact that, for some people, exposure to environmental cues is enough to trigger a craving."

Whatever the reason, don't fall for the myth that 'it's your body's way of telling you it needs something'. Researchers from all over the globe have debunked that theory, finding that a nutritional deficiency isn't necessary for a food craving to be present (which probably explains why we crave chocolate rather than something good for us, like carrots). So what's really to blame?

**Craving culprit #1:
 It's habit, not hunger**

Less than 40 per cent of cravers say they're actually hungry when a craving strikes. On the habit side of things, researchers from Philadelphia have discovered that when food cravings take place,

they activate a part of the brain called the caudate nucleus, which is also instrumental in habit formation. What that means is that we learn to associate certain foods with certain situations, which explains why we crave popcorn as soon as we step into a movie theatre – even if we're stuffed from just eating dinner. It's a habit.

"People completely underestimate how much their environment impacts on their behaviour, and particularly eating behaviour," explains Dr Leah Brennan, a clinical and health psychologist who specialises in weight and eating behaviour. "We're very influenced by our environment", she says, and also by foods that evoke happy memories. Researchers from the University of Illinois in the US found that the foods we crave are often those that trigger happy past associations, or feelings that a person wants to recapture.





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Beat it by: Dr Brennan's tip is to start recognising your triggers. "Keeping a food diary, noting down what you eat, in which situations, with which people and how you were feeling at the time is a good start.

"It'll help you develop an awareness of the fact that, for example, you tend to eat chocolate whenever you're in front of the television, and

awareness is the first step to making a change." This theory is backed up by British research, which found that consciousness of eating habits, encouraged by diary keeping, is associated with lower consumption of high-fat snacks.

Once you've figured out your craving triggers, don't rely on willpower to overcome them or you may be setting yourself up for

failure. Instead, you may need to change your routine.

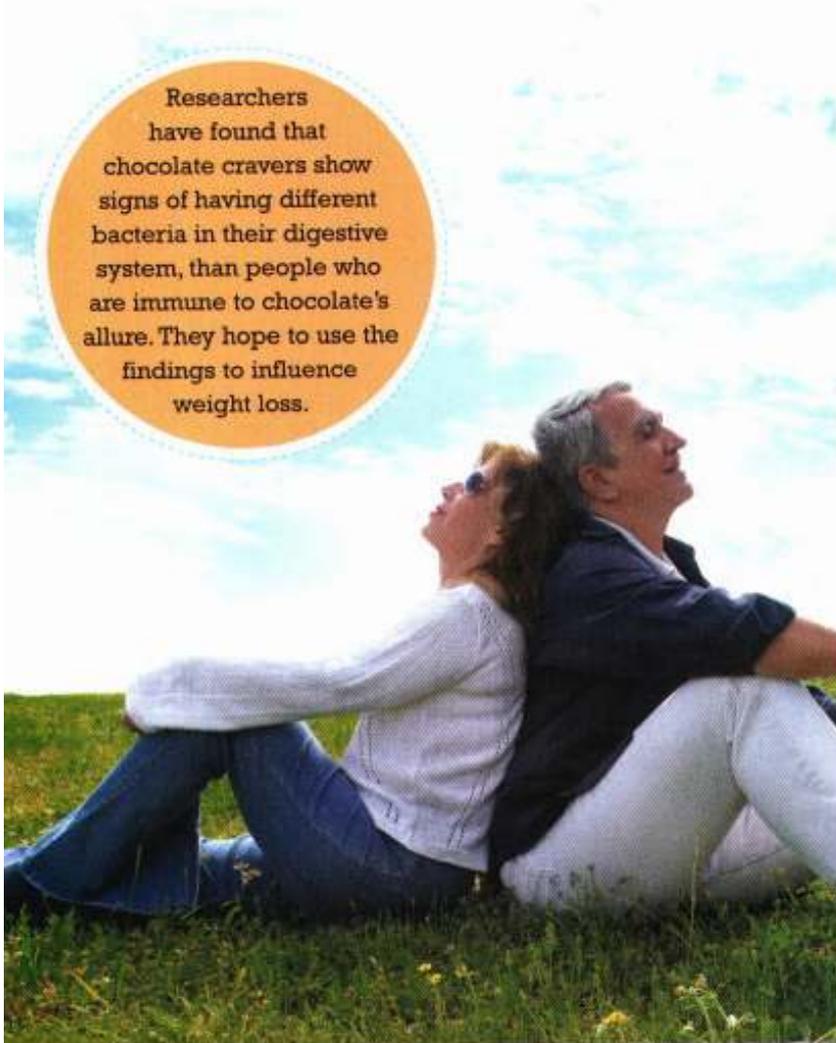
The need for this was proven by American researchers who found that physical locations are some of the most powerful cues to behaviour. Actually changing the environment is a better tactic than just relying on willpower alone to overcome a craving.

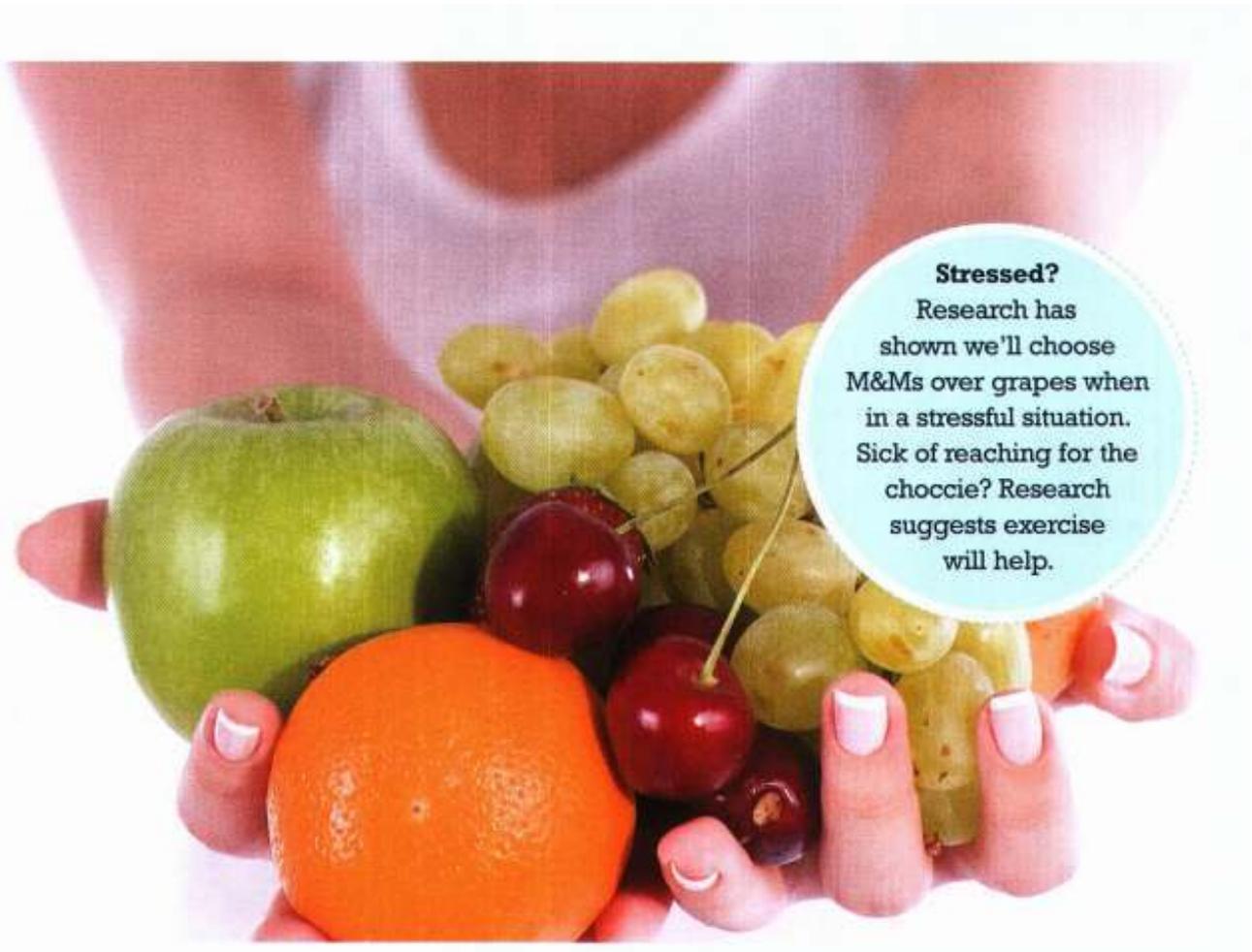
**Craving culprit #2:
 You're under stress**

Most of us have been here – craving chocolate (or anything) as a result of stress. And researchers from Leeds University have proved that stressful situations can indeed make people opt for high-fat, high-sugar snacks, rather than healthier food choices. Their study showed how stress caused by events like arguing with a colleague or friend, a meeting with the boss, missing a deadline or even something like losing keys, was enough to cause people to eat more in-between-meal snacks.

But stress isn't the only emotion capable of causing cravings – when another group of US researchers monitored two groups of people, one watching a happy, feelgood movie and the other watching a sad flick, they found that those in the second group consumed 36 per cent more popcorn as a result. Even your gender can influence which emotions spark a craving. While women are more likely to crave a particular food when they're depressed or sad, it's when men

Researchers have found that chocolate cravers show signs of having different bacteria in their digestive system, than people who are immune to chocolate's allure. They hope to use the findings to influence weight loss.





Stressed?
 Research has shown we'll choose M&Ms over grapes when in a stressful situation. Sick of reaching for the choccie? Research suggests exercise will help.

are happy that their cravings usually escalate.

Beat it by: Finding other ways to deal with your emotions. Dr Brennan explains: "Once you've recognised which emotions might be triggering your cravings with the help of a food diary, try to add some other coping mechanisms to your repertoire, so you've got things to turn to other than food when you experience the emotions which typically cause you to eat."

So what's the best coping mechanism to choose? Exercise, say British scientists, who found that a simple 15-minute walk was sufficient to significantly reduce food cravings for chocolate, even when people were tempted by being asked to

Craving culprit #3: You're dieting

It seems that old saying about wanting what you can't have is true – Canadian researchers have found that people deprived of chocolate experience more food cravings than unrestrained eaters and are more likely to subsequently eat the craved food when they're finally exposed to it. It gets even worse for those people cutting carbs in an effort to lose weight. Women who were asked to cut carbs for three days reported stronger food cravings, which then translated into them eating 44 per cent more kilojoules from carb-rich foods on the fourth day.

Beat it by: Doing two things. First, says Accredited Practising Dietitian Emma Stirling, work out how to incorporate your food of choice into your diet, without letting it get out of control. "So practice portion control," she says. "Allow yourself to have a little piece of chocolate each day, enough to satisfy your craving – in terms of long-term success it's much better than trying to go cold turkey."

Don't just try to turn a blind eye to your cravings. At least two studies have shown how people who try to quit thinking about chocolate wind up eating more – sometimes 50 per cent more – than those who verbalise and acknowledge their desire.



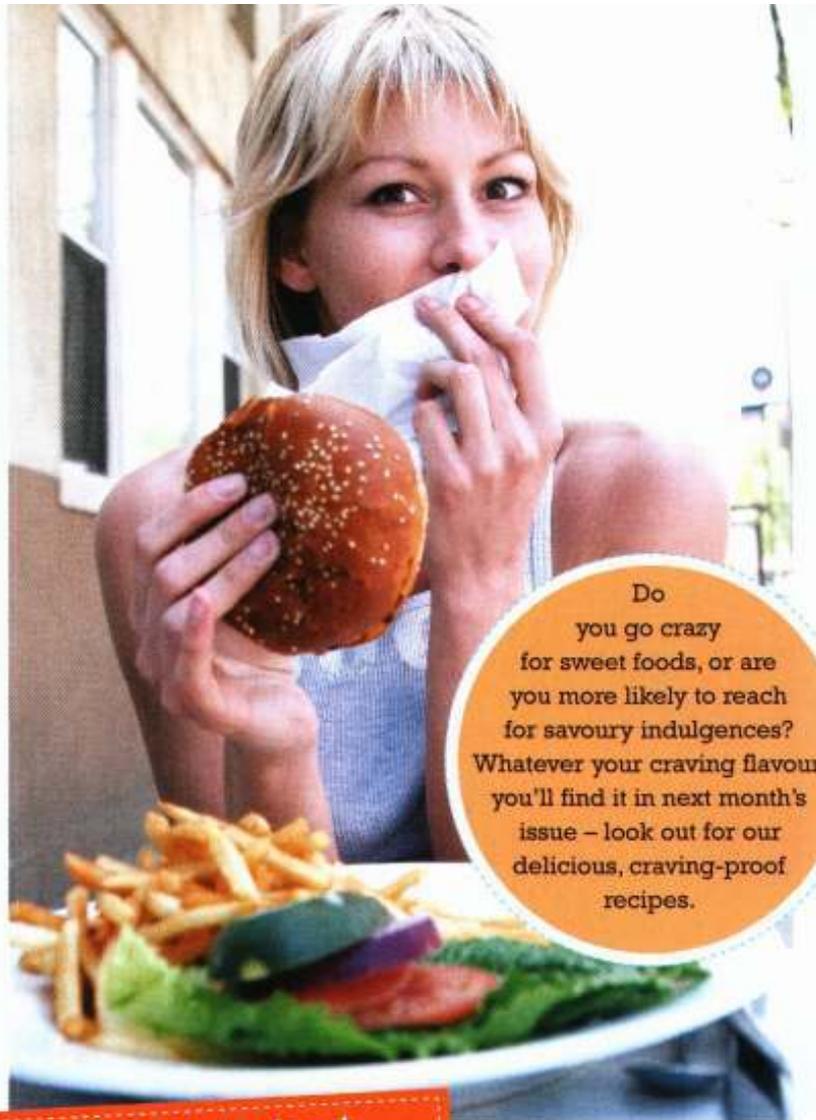


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Craving culprit #4:
 You think too much

And mainly about the food in question. Research from Adelaide has confirmed that, even when environmental or emotional cues aren't present, just thinking about the food you love is enough to spark a craving. The Flinders University study asked participants to recall and rate a previous food-craving experience and then to imagine themselves eating the food they typically crave. Not only did the researchers discover that mental imagery is a key element in sparking a food craving, but the better your ability to recall and imagine a food, the stronger the urge to eat it in real life.

Beat it by: Thinking about something else – sounds simple, and it works. The same Flinders University team asked study participants who were craving chocolate to imagine smelling something non-food-related, such as freshly-mown grass or clean, tumble-dried clothes. Just this simple act reduced their cravings by about 30 per cent. If that doesn't work, try sniffing some peppermint. Research out of the US found people who were regularly exposed to a peppermint aroma were better able to ward off those daily 'slumps' that cause us to seek out a sugar hit. Avoiding these cravings equated to eating at least 11,500 less kilojoules a week! Reason enough to keep some peppermint close by.



Do you go crazy for sweet foods, or are you more likely to reach for savoury indulgences? Whatever your craving flavour, you'll find it in next month's issue – look out for our delicious, craving-proof recipes.

the taste test

It turns out one person's chocolate is another person's cheese – in other words, different people crave different foods. And, according to researchers from the University of Illinois, whether you're male or female may have a lot to do with it. It's no surprise to learn that men find most comfort in warm, hearty, meal-related foods, like steak and casseroles, while women tend to prefer snack-based options, such as chocolate and ice-cream.

As for whether you crave sweet or salty foods, French researchers say that, while the majority of

food cravings aren't linked to actual hunger, a penchant for salt is more likely to indicate that your body wants a real meal, compared to a craving for chocolate.

But, regardless of the flavour of your craving, at least one study has confirmed that it's more likely to be the kilojoules in food, rather than the just the carbohydrate (as was previously thought), that acts as the drawcard. In fact, foods that contain carbs, fat and protein (which covers off both chocolate and French fries) repeatedly top the 'most craved' list.



Craving culprit #5: Addictive food

The food you eat could be addictive, say New Zealand-based researchers, who explain that if the object of your desire is a heavily processed, high-GI food (a doughnut fits the bill nicely), then you might have an addiction on your hands. That's because foods with a high GI cause blood-sugar levels to spike sharply – a 'rush' that seems to stimulate the same areas of the brain involved in nicotine addiction.

Beat it by: The Auckland-based researchers say that low-GI foods, which offer a more stable and long-lasting source of energy, are the way to go for 'addicts'. They liken the effect to when smokers use slow-release forms of nicotine – such as patches – to recover from an addiction.

Stirling agrees that trying to make smarter snack choices the next time a craving hits is key: "There's no point fooling yourself that a celery stick will do the trick if what you really want is a bar of chocolate, but you can be clever by choosing a snack that has a similar taste and texture, but less kilojoules. So if it's chips you're craving, pop some plain popcorn instead and add a little bit of salt. Or make a chocolate drink by adding a small helping of chocolate topping to a glass of reduced-fat milk. And, of course, fruit is a much healthier way than lollies to satisfy a craving for something sweet."

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WHAT'S SLEEP GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Potentially a lot, if a small study from the University of Chicago is anything to go by. Researchers found that after just two nights' worth of poor sleep, where people had four hours of shut-eye rather than eight, the hormones that control appetite became confused. While leptin, the hormone that's responsible for telling the brain there's no need for food, decreased by 18 per cent, ghrelin, which flicks the switch to let the body know it's food time, increased by 28 per cent. And not only did the study participants' hunger increase, the type of food they craved changed as well – they wanted foods that were high in both kilojoules and carbohydrates, like cookies, chips and pasta.

A sweet trick to ward off that after-lunch snack attack is to chew gum. Two recent studies have shown how chewing sugar-free gum can suppress appetite and reduce afternoon kilojoule intake by between 150 and 250 kilojoules.



tap cravings away

Something called Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) has shown promise in helping people overcome food cravings. It involves tapping on the head while reciting pre-determined statements which address the problem at hand.

EFT has been described as 'psychological acupuncture' by Griffith University's Dr Peta Stapleton, and the first stage of a study using EFT to reduce food cravings has just been completed. Dr Stapleton says the results are

promising. "At the start, most people rated their cravings as being somewhere around the eight to 10 mark. After six months of treatment, most of which they performed on themselves at home, around 80 per cent of the people who had followed the treatment as instructed, said their food cravings had fallen to a score of zero, one or two." hfg



Karen Fittall is a freelance health journalist with an interest in food-related psychology and research.