Dear Alice,

I try to eat a piece of fruit for dessert after a meal; however, when I have substituted after-meal sweet cravings with fruit, I still end up craving some other type of sweets, i.e., candy, chocolate, ice cream. It seems that after every meal, I can't feel satisfied until I have eaten something of this food category. I do try to listen to my body and this appears to be programmed into my mind telling my body it is wanting this food consistently. Can you provide any explanation as I am trying to lose weight and this type of food is empty calories and unhealthy? I work out 6 days a week and have recently given up smoking.

Answer

Dear Reader,

The frustration you feel in controlling your sweet tooth is understandable. There are many facets to this issue, so no one answer applies to everyone. Based on your situation described here, you can consider the following possibilities and see how they play a role for you. First, you mentioned that you are trying to lose weight. Quite often, when a person tries to shed some pounds, s/he cuts back on the size and composition of his or her meals. A recent fad has been to limit carbohydrates in one's diet. This leaves most people unfulfilled, still "wanting" something else. Others cut way back on fat, compromising flavor and fullness. Some eat what they think they should eat, without enjoying their food. Do any of these situations sound familiar to you? If your meal is satisfying, you may be able to handle the craving and let it pass, or not experience the craving at all. Try to incorporate sensory appeal—different tastes, textures, colors, and food temperatures—into your meals. You'll be surprised as to what a difference these factors can make.

Second, you wrote that you recently quit smoking. Congratulations! That's the healthiest change you can make. Everything tastes better when you become a non-smoker. With smoking cessation, however, some people experience variations in appetite and increased cravings for sweets to compensate for the lack of nicotine. These are generally temporary. Realize that you have already overcome a difficult obstacle. Asking yourself to quit smoking, lose weight, exercise more, and stop eating sweets is a lot to expect of one person at one time. Reconsider what you can successfully accomplish, setting short- and long-term goals that are realistic for you and workable within your typical schedule and patterns.

Third, restriction can lead to overindulgence. Some people find that the more they try to stop...
eating something, such as sweets, the more they want or the more out of control they become when they finally succumb. Allowing yourself one treat each day is a way to finding some middle ground. This can be difficult to work through at first, but the potential is there if you stick with it. One approach is to buy a single sized serving item daily, whether it's candy, a cookie, or whatever you like. Knowing that you can have a little every day can make the food seem less forbidden and more acceptable. This approach reinforces the concept of "a reasonable amount," and can help in curbing excessive intake.

Last (and perhaps most importantly), some people use sweets or other types of cravings and/or overeating as a coping mechanism for emotions. Do you find, or have you ever found, the cravings come when you are stressed, bored, lonely, sad, or even happy? As children, many of us were soothed with a cookie or other treat, and have learned to tame emotions with food, associating such eats with comfort or nostalgia. What starts as a coping mechanism can turn into a well-ingrained routine, becoming a harder habit to break over time. If this applies to you, you can take some time to observe what is happening. Try to determine what your patterns are. Are there other ways you can deal with your feelings besides resorting to sweets? For some people, distracting themselves with activity can work; for others, facing their issues by journaling, for example, can help. Either way, taking yourself away from the craving for a short while may help it to subside and/or pass. Sometimes this practice won't work, and sometimes it will. However, the more times you try, the more successes from which you can draw. In the long run, working on changing this behavior can enable you to feel more in control, rather than allowing the craving to control you.

So, it isn't so simple ? but that doesn't mean it's not possible. Best wishes on turning this pattern into something healthier, too.

Alice!
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