Dear Alice,

Why do I crave chocolate around my period? Is there some vitamin or mineral my body is craving I can take to ease my craving for chocolate? I eat about six candy bars a day when I go through my menstrual cycle.

Answer

Dear Reader,

The symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) vary from woman to woman; it sounds like you have been hit hard by the craving for sweet foods. Researchers studying the causes of PMS don't have definitive answers as to why women experience a range of symptoms during the seven to ten days before their periods, including why some crave chocolate.

There are a wide variety of arguments as to why many people — premenstrual women or otherwise — have chocolate cravings. Some think certain compounds in chocolate may be physiologically active, perhaps by inducing mood-lifting chemicals like serotonin or dopamine in the brain. Others have argued that deficiencies in either magnesium or iron (perhaps heightened during menstruation) make people desire chocolate, which has a fair amount of both minerals. However, there is little hard evidence supporting these physiological bases for chocolate cravings. Some have pointed out that people do not crave other foods higher in magnesium and iron nearly as often, making the mineral deficiency explanation seem less likely. Further, one study comparing chocolate bars to cocoa capsules found that only the former actually reduced cravings. Thus, it might be orosensory effects (the way chocolate feels in your mouth), non-chocolate-specific compounds (like the fat in chocolate bars), or even cultural associations that make chocolate so satisfying, not chemical properties.

As far as PMS goes, double-blind studies have been carried out to assess whether vitamin and mineral supplements help to alleviate the symptoms. So far, none have been proven to be beneficial, although taking a vitamin supplement may help some women on an individual basis.

You seem to realize that six candy bars a day, even when you're having PMS, is probably not the healthiest way to calm your cravings. If you want to cut back on the chocolate snacks, one option is to simply employ willpower. Easier said than done, right? If willpower alone won't do, you could try a number of other solutions, such as:
• Eat small amounts of high quality dark chocolate rather than candy bars or milk chocolate (which may have extra ingredients, calories, and fat)
• Reduce the number of candy bars you eat during PMS gradually
• Substitute a healthier sweet, such as fruit or frozen yogurt, for some of the chocolate
• When you have a craving, wait 15-30 minutes to see if it passes. If it doesn’t pass, see how long you can wait it out. If you really can’t wait it out, have a small piece of dark chocolate.

If you are willing to put a little extra time and effort into curbing your cravings, you could keep a diary for a few months where you record your feelings, physiological changes (including appetite), diet, and exercise habits. This may help you in pinpointing when the cravings begin so you will be prepared to control them. It may also highlight other reasons (e.g., mild depression) that may explain your increased cravings for chocolate.

Remember that diet and exercise are key components in controlling the severity of PMS symptoms for many women. It is best to eat a diet rich in complex carbohydrates (whole grains, fruits, and veggies), and to avoid, as best you can, sugar, salt, alcohol, and caffeine before and during your period. By all means, give a multi-vitamin a try. (It’s a good idea to check with your health care provider first if you’re already taking any medications or have any medical conditions.) A regular exercise routine may help ease the symptoms of PMS, too.

You may decide that managing your chocolate cravings is a more realistic option than completely eliminating them. By taking some of the steps outlined above, you may find the trick that works for you to keep your chocolate consumption at a reasonable level, and learn a great deal about your body and yourself in the process. Good luck!

Alice!
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Published date:
Mar 29, 1996
Last reviewed on:
May 17, 2013