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The Chocoholic's Survival Guide

By LEANNA SKARNULIS

More than once, you've driven to a convenience store at midnight just to get a chocolate "fix." Maybe you even bought a few extra items, like batteries and milk, to disguise your true intentions. Later, you carefully disposed of the telltale candy wrappers so your family, partner, or roommate wouldn't suspect what you'd been up to.

Does this mean you're a "chocoholic"?

Though chocolate-lovers who have gone to such lengths may feel a kinship with alcoholics or drug addicts, there's little scientific evidence that chocolate is actually addictive.

"There's recent research on brain chemistry that suggests people might become addicted to foods, but there's no solid data," says Gerard J. Musante, PhD, a pioneer in the treatment of obesity. "Any pleasurable experience produces those kinds of brain chemistries. It's part of the human condition."

What's most important, he believes, is that telling yourself you're "addicted" is self-defeating.

"You'll think overindulging in chocolate isn't your fault, that the devil made you do it," says Musante, founder of the Structure House residential weight loss program in Durham, N.C. "Thinking in that way doesn't allow you to gain control over the problem."

What Makes Us Crave?

Addiction aside, there's no denying that chocolate cravings are certainly real -- and women are especially vulnerable.

Cindy Moore, MS, RD, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, says it's not clear exactly what might cause these chocolately pangs of desire.

"There needs to be more research to determine what's going on, and it may be there are multiple things going on," says Moore, director of nutrition therapy at The Cleveland Clinic.

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She summarizes several theories:

- **Deprivation.** If you love the taste of chocolate but forbid yourself to have it, you may crave it all the more.
- **Stress reduction.** In response to stress, the body produces adrenaline (the "fight or flight" response that dates back to our prehistoric ancestors). Carbohydrates provide an immediate shot of energy. And for many of us, of course, sugary chocolate is the carbohydrate of choice.
- **Hormonal changes.** Hormones fluctuate with the menstrual cycle. When estrogen rises and progesterone and serotonin fall, women can experience depression and irritability that lead to carbohydrate cravings.
- **Brain chemicals.** Neuropeptide Y (NPY) is a brain chemical that increases carbohydrate cravings as it peaks in the morning and when we diet. Another brain chemical that may be involved is galanin, which peaks at night and which promotes fat intake.
- **Chocolate's ingredients.** Chocolate contains phenylethylamine and fat, both of which increase the body's production of endorphins, chemicals that lead to feelings of well-being. Chocolate also contains the stimulants theobromine and caffeine. And the sugar in chocolate boosts levels of the brain chemical serotonin, producing feelings of relaxation.

What's Eating You?

Musante says that people being treated for obesity at Structure House learn to understand why they have certain cravings, starting with their earliest memory of that food.

For example, one woman was fond of lemon drops. As a child she had a difficult mother but a warm, loving father. When her father came home from work, he would have her put her hand in his coat pocket and pull out a bag of lemon drops.

"Whenever she wanted to capture that same emotion, to feel safe and secure, food became the vehicle," says Musante. "How do you capture that emotion without food? Is it another person? Spend time with memories of that person. Nurture yourself. Eliminate chocolate. It's the middleman."

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Vyvan Lynn, a freelance writer in Kite, Ga., didn't need a treatment program to get control of her chocolate cravings. She lost 100 pounds five years ago and has kept it off. She says that self-nurturing and putting her life in balance were the keys.

Lynn had gained weight after the birth of her second child.

"A lot was going on in my life," she says. "I spent a lot of time sitting in a chair nursing the baby and eating Oreos without even being aware of eating. What I really needed was hugs. Or I was stressed and tired and really needed a nap."

Tame Your Cravings

OK, so you've accepted that you're the person doing the eating and that you are therefore in charge of the problem. And you know that what you're really looking for is ... chocolate! How do you deal with that?

Experts don't agree on the best strategies to get the chocolate monkey off your back. You're the best judge of what will work for you. Here are a few ideas that have worked for others:

- See worms. When she first decided to conquer her chocolate cravings, Lynn use visualization tricks. When she was tempted to indulge, she says, "I envisioned white worms coming out of the chocolate."
- Banish the brown stuff, at least until you get a handle on your cravings. At first, Lynn swore off chocolate completely. Later she learned to enjoy it in moderation, by, for example, eating a fun-sized candy bar. However, Musante believes that if you have an unhealthy relationship with chocolate, you should recognize that it is one you must sever: "If you were in a relationship with somebody, would you break it off except for Tuesday afternoons?"

Cut back gradually. "It can be very challenging to change our diet," says Moore. "Our bodies aren't conditioned to making drastic changes, so it might take a series of steps to cut back." For example, if you're used to eating a large candy bar, go to the next smaller size, then the next smaller. Eventually, you might find one chocolate kiss or truffle is enough -- or try putting a few chocolate chips into a bowl of sliced bananas or strawberries. "The danger in cutting out chocolate altogether is that you might obsess and feel you could eat the whole candy display case," Moore says. "Better to have a small amount and be done with it."

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- Plan your meals ahead of time, and write them down. Once you get into the habit of planning what you'll eat, Musante says, thinking ahead will become second nature. Use your plan to strategize ways to manage challenging situations. Says Musante: "Never go anywhere without thinking, will there be food? Don't be surprised. Plan every meal."
- Don't let yourself get overly hungry. Lynn eats three meals a day, plus morning and afternoon snacks. "I'm very structured," she says. "If I snack on M&Ms, I know how many calories are in that bag. The next day, I might have a NutriGrain bar or an apple."
- Choose nutritious, fiber-rich foods. The recently released U.S. dietary guidelines recommend foods that are rich in both nutrients and fiber. "Whole grains, fruits, legumes, and vegetables make good snacks and have staying power," says Moore. Peanut butter and nuts (in small portions) and fat-free plain yogurt are also good choices.
- Cut back on sweets -- chocolate and others. Eating sweets, Moore says, can spur cravings for more. "It sets up a cycle in a lot of people who have a problem with insulin regulation," she says. "If you can cut back on sweets, you can reduce cravings."
- Know your vulnerable times of day. "All our organs have internal clocks," says Musante. "You may have taught your system to need chocolate at 3 o'clock. Recognize that it might take a week or two to break the habit, and some of it will require white-knuckling."
- Drink water. "Your body can confuse the need for fluid with food," says Moore. She advises drinking water or other non-caloric beverages to stay hydrated.
- Sleep. As with water, your body might confuse a need for sleep with a need for food, says Moore. "That's why a lot of snacking occurs at night."
- Exercise. Physical activity can really help control cravings, says Moore. "Aerobics, strength training, Pilates, relaxation techniques -- all help keep cravings at bay." Whenever you're tempted to eat chocolate to stimulate those feel-good endorphins, stop. Instead, get the endorphins going with 20-30 minutes of moderate exercise. Now you really have something to feel good about: you turned off the cravings, and got in your exercise, to boot.

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