

Sweet Indulgence

By Lisa Schilling RN

Indulging your sweet tooth is often associated with a lack of willpower or some other personal flaw, but this is not factual. There are many underlying causes that fuel a desire for sugar. It can be different for everyone and it takes self-study to find out what causes a personal pension for the sweet stuff. Many things contribute to a positive association with sugar. Often smells or certain foods will bring back an association from your childhood. These memories fuel the feelings that emerge when the food is experienced again.

Since most of the memories involving food center around a special occasion or event, the foods eaten will take on an embodiment of the special time. We eat those foods and experience that connection. Did grandma ever offer you a sweet treat as a reward for good behavior? These positive associations become deeply ingrained in your brain. The same can happen in the negative. Have you ever gotten ill after eating something? The mere smell of the offending food is enough to evoke retching in some, due to the strong negative association created.

When you eat sugar or carbohydrates your body will release insulin. This leads to the release serotonin, a brain chemical that makes you feel good. Insulin is a necessary link in the chain of events that produces serotonin. Some people with lower levels of it are more vulnerable to sugar cravings. The release of this mood-enhancing chemical explains the strong association bond that is created when you eat sugar. This carbohydrate-insulin-serotonin sequence is part of the reason you can feel physical cravings for sugary treats. The brain will introduce the thought of sugar in an attempt to regulate your brain chemistry when serotonin levels are low. Why sugar? You have used it before for a boost, so that is what the brain uses as a solution to your current low. The

brain only knows what you have used before or what you tell it.

When you eat a refined or simple carbohydrate you satisfy the brain and there is an increase in serotonin, but it will not trigger the signal that tells your brain you are full. The greater level of refinement, the more stripped of natural fibers, fats, proteins, vitamins, and antioxidants it is. These highly refined carbs take less time for the body to digest; therefore you get a faster insulin response. Over time these quick spikes in insulin and glucose can damage your metabolism, leading to insulin resistance and more cravings. By eating a complex carb, protein or healthy fat with your simple or refined carb you can slow the spike and crash cycle, thus leading to less cravings to reproduce the pleasure response.

It is important to strive for a healthy balance. Consider your diet. Look to include all food groups in your meal planning and focus on adding more healthy options while reducing the less-than-healthy ones. Sometimes unhealthy options speak to our mental health and we need them to keep feelings of deprivation in check. To maintain a healthy nutritional balance, try taking a good daily multi-vitamin and a fish oil type capsule to provide the healthy omega-3s. Balance simple carb consumption with protein or a complex carb to lessen the spike and to help stabilize your blood sugar over time.

Break out of any bad cycles of consumption you have developed. If certain events or times of day cause cravings, have a plan to do something different until you break the association. Look for ways to add more pleasure to your life or to restore. A good balance of exertion and recovery is vital to all of your body systems. All work and no play can make you more than dull; it can make you very sad and unhealthy too! Don't fall victim to the cycle of sugary cravings. The pattern can be exhausting and fruitless.

Look at the real reasons you have cravings and start to address ways to combat them. When you begin to create balance in your routine and habits, you will start to shake free from the grip of sweet cravings. Your life will become more stable as you break the bonds that sugar has created in your mind and body. The mind will no longer need to introduce sugar into your thoughts when you regularly use non-food rewards to boost your mood and raise low serotonin levels. Start investigating your sugar habits today. You will likely begin to see associations that you may have overlooked. Begin to create new and healthy ones while you work at not honoring the old associations. Remember the principle of give and take. In order to remain balanced, you must give back for anything you have taken away. Remember this as you try to bust out of old patterns. Look forward to forging new ones.