



# Everything You Need to Know About Sugar Cravings

Is sugar really addictive? Experts explain how to kick the cravings for good.



By [K. Aleisha Fetters](#), Contributor May 12, 2017, at 12:31 p.m.

**YOU JUST WANT SOMETHING** sweet. OK, you *need* something sweet. Some of us just have some really strong [sugar cravings](#) at times (or maybe all the time).

And with [added sugar](#) in everything from cookies and salad dressings to hamburgers, it's no surprise that the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates the average American puts away more than [130 pounds](#) of the sweet stuff every year. The result? An increased risk of weight gain, [Type 2 diabetes](#), inflammation, heart disease, Alzheimer's and, yes, addiction.

[See: [The 10 Best Diets for Healthy Eating.](#)]

## Why You Get Addicted to Sugar

While sugar occurs naturally in healthy foods ranging from [dairy](#) to fruits and veggies, added sugars such as table sugar and high-fructose corn syrup do more than tickle our taste buds. They tickle our brains. "Data from experiments and controlled studies show that our brains respond to sugar much in the same way as they respond to drugs of abuse," says research neuroscientist [Nicole Avena](#), assistant professor at the Icahn School of

Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York and author of “Why Diets Fail (Because You’re Addicted to Sugar).”

Avena’s research, published in *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, shows that, similar to addictive drugs, sugar-bingeing spikes levels of **feel-good dopamine** (a neurotransmitter your body releases in response to pleasurable activities like sex) and opioids (natural pain-squashing substances that act like morphine and codeine) in the brain. It also sparks heightened activity in the nucleus accumbens, the brain’s pleasure center, which is linked with **addictive behaviors**. In fact, a 2015 University of Pennsylvania study reported that deep brain stimulation of the nucleus accumbens can mediate both cocaine and **sugar addiction** in rats.

[See: **[Are These Healthy Snacks Making You Fat?](#)**]

“Sugar hijacks the brain, in a sense. It makes you feel great, then the come-down makes you feel terrible,” Avena says. Sugar crash, anyone? “This cycle leads to tolerance and needing more sugar to get the same reward or to taste something as being sweet.”

## **The Origins of Sugar Cravings (or Why You Really Want It)**

Just because you **crave sugar** from time to time doesn’t necessarily mean you’re addicted.

After all, we eat sugar for more reasons than addiction. The big, nature-intended one is for energy. A simple, easy-to-digest carb, sugar is the fastest way to perk up your body when you’re fatigued, sleep-deprived or just **feeling hungry**, explains Toronto-based registered dietitian **Abby Langer**. So if you go on a no-carb crash diet that leaves your fuel gauge on empty or you have a bad night’s sleep, yes, you’re going to crave sugar for energy.

Even on a normal day, though, you might experience your energy drop and want sugar. “Around 3 or 4 in the afternoon, the body experiences a drop in alertness due to the fact that the stress hormone cortisol is falling. This decrease leads to a feeling of fatigue, which many of us feed in an effort to

increase alertness,” explains registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator [Laura Cipullo](#), author of “The Women’s Health Body Clock Diet.”

### Sniffing Out Sugar: How to Cut Back on the Omnipresent Sweet Stuff

U.S. dietary guidelines target lowering sugar intake. But how can you do that?

Michael O. Schroeder Dec. 22, 2015



But you probably aren’t going to crave an orange. You’re going to [crave chocolate](#). For starters, that’s because a single piece of chocolate has more sugar than an entire orange. A whole orange contains about 12 grams of sugar. A bar of chocolate? About 78. Plus, that orange contains more fiber, which is responsible for slowing the absorption of sugar into your bloodstream, so you don’t get the same sugar spike with an orange that you would with that chocolate bar.

At the same time (and this is when we start to flirt with addiction), a lot of us mow down on sugar to improve our moods. “Think about it – it’s almost culturally accepted to want sugar when you’re stressed. After someone breaks up with you, what are you expected to do? Eat a pint of ice cream,” Langer says. However, the occasional stress-induced binge can easily turn into emotional dependency and addiction.

### How to Overcome Your Sugar Cravings

If you think you reach for sugar due to low energy, simply [make sure your body is fueled](#) in the first place, Langer says. Getting seven to nine hours of quality sleep per night, eating a balanced diet that doesn’t remove whole carbs like whole-wheat pasta and apples, and staying active can all help to reduce cravings. If you believe you’re reaching for the Ben & Jerry’s for emotional reasons, fill the void and practice other, healthy activities that naturally increase dopamine, Cipullo says.

For instance, research from the University of Muenster in Germany shows that running increases levels of dopamine in the brain and, the higher the

intensity, the higher the [reward](#). Meanwhile, research published in the Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience shows that [mindfulness practices](#) such as [meditation](#) increase levels of dopamine and improve mood over the long term.

But if your cravings are a bit more intense, there's another way. Some people can have full-on withdrawal when they [eliminate sugar](#) from their diet. Irritability and headaches are the main ones, but shakes and tremors aren't uncommon, Avena says. That's why it's so important to *not* go cold turkey.

Plus, since sugar is so rampant in our food supply, telling yourself, "I'm never going to eat sugar again" is unrealistic. "The truth of the matter is, I don't think it's possible to remove all sugars from your diet if you want to live like a normal person," Avena says. "We don't all have the ability and time to prepare every single item of food we consume and make sure it has zero sugar."

But you can significantly cut your sugar intake – and your cravings – with a few simple steps. First, identify the biggest sources of added sugar in your diet. For some of us, they're obvious (e.g. soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages), but [don't overlook salty foods](#) like chips or even bread. Check the label for sugar and any of its aliases, including anhydrous dextrose, cane crystals, corn sweetener, corn syrup, crystal dextrose, evaporated cane juice, fructose sweetener, fruit juice concentrates, high-fructose corn syrup, malt syrup and molasses, Langer recommends.

[See: [These Healthy Seasonings Are Tasty Substitutes for Sugar and Salt.](#)]

Once you identify the top sugar source in your diet, work to phase out that one food. Sub it out with a no-added-sugar healthy alternative. For instance, if you usually drink soda, try tea with lemon. Give it a couple of weeks, check in with yourself and be honest about how you're doing, Avena says.

Ask yourself: If someone offered you a soda right now, could you turn it down without remorse? If so, it's time to think about the next sugar-packed food you want to eliminate or cut down on. "As you wean yourself off of sugar,

you'll find that things taste more sweet with less sugar, so it will become easier to consume less," Langer says.

And back to that orange: [Don't remove fruit from your diet](#). Most people need to be eating more, not less, of nature's vitamin-packed candy.

## Best Diets Overall

RANK	DIET NAME
#1	<a href="#">DASH Diet</a>
#2	<a href="#">Mediterranean Diet</a>
#3	<a href="#">MIND Diet</a>
#4 (tie)	<a href="#">The Flexitarian Diet</a>
#4 (tie)	<a href="#">Mayo Clinic Diet</a>
#4 (tie)	<a href="#">TLC Diet</a>
#4 (tie)	<a href="#">Weight Watchers Diet</a>
#8 (tie)	<a href="#">The Fertility Diet</a>

#8 (tie)

Volumetrics Diet

#10 (tie)

Jenny Craig Diet

#10 (tie)

Ornish Diet

#10 (tie)

Vegetarian Diet

DIET Ranking information as of January 4th, 2017