

GOOD HEALTH

BODY & MIND WELLNESS



[health Q&A]


Just One More Piece . . .

Dr. Bill Sears explains why we crave snacks and desserts and how you can manage temptation in your family—year-round *BY RACHEL RABKIN PECHMAN*

MMMM . . . the enticing aroma of a baking pumpkin pie, the rich taste of chocolate, the salty crackle of a potato chip—is your mouth watering yet? It's common to crave these kinds of goodies. They're full of carbohydrates, a compound that, when eaten, can make us feel happy. During the holidays, when carb-loaded foods seem to be everywhere, it's easy to understand how we can overindulge. How can you help curb cravings and steer your family toward healthier alternatives this month and throughout the year? We got answers from Bill Sears, M.D., renowned pediatrician and author of more than 30 books

on child care, including *Dr. Sears's L.E.A.N. Kids: A Total Health Program for Children Ages 6 to 12*; and co-creator of the L.E.A.N. programs (drsearslean.com).

PARENT & CHILD: *Why do we crave carbohydrates so much?*

DR. BILL SEARS: Because when carbs hit the brain, they trigger the release of serotonin, which is a happy hormone. So people who eat a lot of carbs learn to associate eating them with happy feelings. What's more, foods full of junky carbs (such as chips and cookies), which are digested the fastest, produce a quick jet of serotonin, so the carb craver learns, "I eat this and I feel good fast." It becomes a pattern. 

P&C: Aren't carbs good for you, though?

DR. SEARS: They do serve a useful biochemical purpose. The brain uses carbs (which are broken down into sugars in the body) as its sole source of energy—and it needs them to function. So when blood sugar stores get too low, there is a carb-craving hormone that signals the brain that you need to eat. The problem results when carb cravings get out of hand.

P&C: Would limiting our kids' carb intake keep cravings from getting out of control?

DR. SEARS: It's not how many carbs you should be concerned with; it's the kind of food they're in. Kids need carbs because kids are very active. The key is to always find a meal or snack that partners carbs with protein and fiber. This curbs the sugar high you get and makes your food more filling. I like to say that good carbs have friends (protein and fiber), and bad carbs play alone.

P&C: What are some examples of good carb combos?

DR. SEARS: A whole-wheat pita with hummus (full of fiber). Or a fiber-rich apple with a piece of cheese. Raisins with nuts are another smart choice.

P&C: We've all heard that unhealthy food choices can affect mood and behavior in kids. Is that true?

DR. SEARS: Yes. Food definitely affects how well a child's brain works, including his moods and abilities. In a child's brain, junk food can cause neurotransmitters, which pass along information, to function improperly. And a lack of good nutrition has been shown to have a dramatic effect on a child's ability to concentrate; her fine motor skills; and her overall attitude, behavior, and performance. Healthy foods, on the other hand, help children to function at a more optimal level.

P&C: How can families learn to make healthier choices instead of giving in to cravings for junk and sweet treats?

DR. SEARS: It's a three-step process. One, shape young tastes early in childhood. When children grow up being served only real foods (like fruits, veggies, and whole grains), they learn to crave real foods rather than artificially sweetened and fatty foods. And you can reshape tastes at any age.

“ Let yourself have that square of chocolate each day if it will keep your cravings in check and stop you from overindulging later. ”

P&C: What's the second step?

DR. SEARS: Banish junk from the house. I know this sounds drastic, but if you don't buy it, it won't be available, and out of sight is out of mind—and out of tummy. The eye and the stomach are closely related. If you crave chips and the chips are there, that reinforces your cravings. Keep bowls of fruit around the house and cups of yogurt in the fridge. When a child has a craving, that's what he'll see, and that's what he'll reach for and eat.

P&C: And the third step for limiting our junk food cravings?

DR. SEARS: Walk away from them. Get moving rather than eating. Kids and adults who are bored or stressed are more likely to crave carbs. So when you or your kids feel the urge to eat junk, try to get up and run around, shoot baskets with the family, or round up the neighbors for a rousing game of touch football. Studies have shown that when a craving hits, if you take a walk, the craving is reduced. Learning to curb cravings with physical activity is a valuable tool for young children to learn. Not only is exercise good for the body, it also stimulates the release of feel-good hormones just as sugar does.

P&C: Should families limit desserts and indulgences during special occasions like holidays or birthdays?

DR. SEARS: By all means, allow for treats! Kids can certainly be taught this concept, and they (and you) can absolutely have a treat once a day or once in a while. It can even help keep cravings at bay. For example, say to yourself and to your kids that it's New Year's Eve, so we're having a special treat—apple pie with ice cream. And let yourself have that square of chocolate each day if it will keep your cravings in check and stop you from overindulging later. Also remember to offer healthier sweet substitutes such as yogurt with fruit toppings, yogurt with cinnamon and honey, or even a special batch of healthy muffins if that's what your child craves. **P&C**

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