

# SportsNutrition

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## The Athlete's Kitchen

*If I crave a candy bar, should I eat a candy bar?* That's the title of one of my most popular blog posts! Clearly, food cravings and sugar addictions are a source of concern and frustration for many athletes who believe that eating one chocolate bar (or whatever food they crave) will lead to eating 10 of them, expand their waistlines, and ruin their health. They avoid chocolate like the plague. Instead, they righteously snack on only healthy foods, like fruit.

While the natural goodness of fruit is indeed the more nutritious and health-promoting choice, some nice chocolate, enjoyed in response to a hankering, can also fit into your sports diet. By regularly enjoying chocolates, you can avoid the strong cravings that lead to eating a sickening amount—not because you are “addicted to sugar” but because you are doing “last chance eating” before you go back into your self-defined food jail.

Keep in mind, your brain has a memory for the food you crave). If you try to ignore your craving for, let's say, chocolate, you'll end up eating it sooner or later. This may happen after you've tried to curb your craving with an apple, crackers, pretzels, sugar-free fudgsicle—anything but the chocolate—and then, 500 calories later, you succumb to what you truly wanted. You could have more wisely enjoyed some chocolate in the first place. You would have saved yourself a bunch of calories!

Food cravings are a popular topic not only on my blog but also among LinkedIn's Intuitive Eating Professionals group. A discussion “*If you crave a food, should you eat it?*” spurred a lot of responses, with the answer being YES! History says that denial and deprivation does not work permanently but rather results in binge eating. After all, if restrictive eating “worked” then everyone who has ever been on a diet would be thin. The majority of Americans are overweight and obese, suggesting that “dieting fall-out” may be contributing to obesity.

To our detriment, we live in a world where enjoying bagels, ice cream, candy, and chips gets “questioned.” Athletes talk about needing “will power” to curb their intake of the foods they crave. But most of us really want to be able to enjoy these foods. We just want to be able to eat them sanely, not in what feels like an out of control pig-out. We need nutrition *skill power* (not *will power*) to learn how to manage today's food supply. That's where a sports dietitian can help you prevent hunger-based binges and find peace with food. (To find a sports dietitian, see SCANdpg.org.)

The question arises: What's so bad about cravings in the first place? Is there really something wrong with eating what you truly want to eat? Cravings are not addictions. That is, if you crave a bagel because it tastes good, why should you not enjoy the bagel? When you eat a food you crave, your brain experiences a biochemical change that signals happiness. Can eating an appropriate portion (as opposed to overeating “the whole thing”) be a bad thing to do? The answer commonly depends on if you are eating the food for fuel vs. mindlessly devouring it for its drug-like effect. Without a doubt, food affects brain chemistry.

## For Athletes with Food Cravings & Sugar Addictions

If you find yourself on the verge of demolishing the whole bag of bagels, stop and ask yourself, “*Does my body need this fuel?*” If the answer is *yes*, you need to learn how to prevent the extreme hunger that triggered the overeating. If the answer is *no*, then ask yourself, “*What am I doing with my feelings?*” Over-eating a craved food can distract you from sadness, smother your emotions, and protect you from feeling alone and lonely. But you are using food for the wrong reason. No amount of bagels, chocolate, or chips will resolve the real problem: you are likely hungry for a hug.

Do certain foods over-excite the pleasure centers in the brain? If so, do those foods become “addictive”? The recent science suggests there is no such thing as “food addiction.” Yes, it may have addictive-like qualities, particularly following a restriction/binge pattern of eating. In my practice, most people who binge have an unbalanced relationship with food; food has become a focus for pleasure.

While there is much we do not know about food and this controversial topic of food addictions, I encourage my clients to first rule-out hunger as the cause for cravings for sugar and other carbohydrates. The physiology of hunger explains why we crave sugar; it's a survival signal for quick energy. When your blood sugar is low, your brain signals an urgent need for sugar. When your muscles are glycogen depleted, you will also experience a nagging hunger until you adequately refuel them.

What can you do to overcome your cravings and “addictions”? First and foremost, experiment with eating heftier breakfasts and lunches to abate hunger. (No, you will not “get fat” by eating more during the day. If you listen to your body, you will observe you are less hungry at night and will simply be able to consume fewer calories.) Also try changing your attitude. The mind is very influential. If you believe you are addicted to a food, you will have a hard time convincing yourself otherwise, despite research that refutes the concept of food addiction and puts the focus on deprivation as a trigger to (over)eat.

The next time you have a craving for a specific food, relax, enjoy eating it *slowly*, taste it, savor the flavor, and linger over the treat. Do this several times throughout the week. Learn to enjoy the treat slowly, in moderation, without feeling guilty. Enjoy the foods you crave at every meal. For example, have a few Hershey's Kisses day after day, at breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack and dinner. Eat them so often that you get sick of them. This may sound unhealthy in the short term but a week or two of excess chocolate will not ruin your health (nor waistline) forever. But by learning your body's responses to different foods, you can at least become educated: food is not addictive and cravings are not bad. There's a possibility you can find peace with food.

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