

Six strategies to help you say no to junk food

by Caitlin Dow, Nutrition Action 6/14/19

Our environment is saturated in calories—cheap, tempting, unnecessary calories. You can't run errands or take a trip to the mall without dealing with a constant barrage of junk foods. Human brains aren't designed to say no to them, though they do our health no favors.

Here are six strategies you can use to resist the flood of junk food fighting for your attention.

1. Don't let yourself get too hungry.

If you're too hungry, "your gut signals tell the reward system in your brain, 'You need to really be on the lookout and respond intensely to any food cues you see,'" says Ashley Gearhardt, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. Her advice: Skip the crash diets and "focus on the quality of the food you eat."

2. Don't drink your calories.

Sugary drinks—soda, sports drinks, energy drinks, or sweetened teas—lead to weight gain. It's not clear why. One possibility: liquid calories may not "register." [People eat only slightly less food](#) when they drink a 150-calorie glass of cola with lunch than when they drink a zero-calorie glass of water or diet cola.

3. Find foods that don't cause war.

Hungry between meals? Try fresh fruit or carrots with hummus. "Try to identify foods that you enjoy but that don't cause an intense internal struggle—'I'm only going to have one bite of this but, oh, God, I want more,'" suggests Gearhardt. "That's

exhausting. The willpower parts of our brain can only take so much.”

4. Address your stress.

“Stress can be a huge cue,” notes Gearhardt. “Notice the emotional triggers that can set you up to crave palatable rewarding foods.” Go for a walk, call a friend, try some meditation, or distract yourself. “The craving will peak and then go down if you don’t give in to it,” says Gearhardt.

Why does stress take a toll? “When we’re stressed, the executive control system in the brain—the signal to stop eating—is weakened. Stopping ourselves from doing things we want is taxing and energy intense. So when we’re stressed, there isn’t as much energy for that.”

5. Get enough sleep.

When researchers let people sleep only four hours a night for five days, [they ate more and gained weight](#). In similar studies, “participants reported increased hunger,” says Erin Hanlon, assistant professor in the department of medicine at the University of Chicago. “And their appetite was greatest for high-carbohydrate or high-fat foods.”

6. Give yourself a break.

“I ask people to have some compassion for themselves, because it is really hard,” says Gearhardt. “Our food environment is set up to make it hard for people to eat healthier.”