

the sweet life

Sugar craving can be difficult to control.
Veronica Debono finds out why.

Faye's* story

"I've craved sugar for as long as I can remember," admits Faye. "My parents used to receive reports from school that I ate sweets from the floor. I remember one particular occasion where I saw an inviting shiny sweet on the ground and knelt in front of it ostentatiously arranging my buckle. Suddenly a large shoe crunched down on the sweet. I looked up at a girl who sneered: 'You were going to eat that weren't you?' I had to stop eating sweets from the floor then as children were starting to notice."

"I used to accompany my mother on her monthly grocery shopping spree and the grocer would give me a small piece of *helwa tat-tork* to nibble. I'd secretly 'clean up' the broken bits and crumbs on the counter too.

"Later, when I babysat for neighbours, I'd rummage through their cupboards and devour biscuits and chocolates. I'd avoid overdoing it so they'd blame their children.

"My parents weren't especially health conscious but I don't remember them ever buying sweets, probably because of budgetary constraints. Occasionally my mother would buy a packet of biscuits which would last for weeks. Whenever someone gave me a chocolate I'd take a mouse-sized nibble every day for a fortnight.

"Later still I remember asking my mother if I could 'invent' my own recipes and I'd ransack the cupboards for castor sugar, icing sugar, chocolate powder, butter and anything

else I could add. Then I'd mix them and gobble my gooey creation. Another favourite was sugar with tinned milk.

"When I made whipping cream by whisking powder in milk, I'd sneak tablespoonfuls of powder into my mouth. Whatever I made, I added at least three times the amount of sugar the recipe called for: I even relished spoonfuls of sugar direct from the sugar bowl.

"Twenty years on, I still crave sugar. When I accompany my children to parties I'm the only mummy at the sweet table competing with the kids on the volume of sweets consumed. I do it discreetly, pretending I'm chatting with the kids or helping out with something. I'd happily forego a whole meal and fast forward to dessert, preferably thick sweet chocolate mousse or a fudge brownie.

"Oddly enough I am not overweight, not thin, but not fat, and my teeth are fine. Other than my nightly sugar fix I am careful about what I eat and I don't smoke and rarely drink. Many friends don't know of my sweet addiction. When I confess it they cannot perceive the extent of it as there is no outward evidence. They laugh fondly and say, 'Oh you can take it!'

"Lately I've started to wonder what damage I may be causing my body. If I became diabetic I wouldn't be able to control my cravings. It's simply too difficult."

Mario Caruana, *Dietician*

Why do some people crave sugar so much?

One of the most common reasons is a meal plan which is not well distributed or is very low in carbohydrates. If one eats a salad which consists of merely vegetables and a protein source there is a high possibility that blood sugar levels will go down and trigger a normal body response in the form of a craving to increase blood sugar levels.

Another reason could be low serotonin levels. Serotonin is our basic feel-good hormone. Hormonal imbalance or weak digestion can lead to low serotonin. Sugars and simple carbohydrates release a short burst of serotonin. One feels good for a moment but soon returns to a low-serotonin state then craves more sugar and simple carbohydrates: it's a vicious circle.

Other reported reasons are habit, comfort eating or family tradition.

Can the craving be curbed successfully? How?

If the main problem is the meal plan, re-arranging meals and snacks with the help of a dietician can decrease 'craving attacks'. In a normal healthy eating scheme some simple sugars may be allowed in the form of a 'treat'.

Can too much sugar lead to diabetes?

Sugar *per se* does not lead to diabetes. However if a person consumes a lot of 'empty calories', then s/he is decreasing his/her chance to eat other nutritious food which the body needs. The main causes of diabetes are environmental e.g. being overweight or obese but there is also a predisposition element to becoming diabetic through genetics. 20% of people diagnosed with diabetes do not have weight problems and some do not have sugar cravings.

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*Names have been changed.