

Daily Union Article
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Article Title: Mood Food

I have never been able to explain why, but when I was pregnant with both of my children, I craved mashed potatoes and gravy. Not just any kind of gravy – it had to be cream gravy and light on the salt and pepper, please! Most times, that is all I would order when my husband and I would go out to eat. But during pregnancy isn't the only time I have had specific food cravings. I crave some foods more in one season than in another or during one time of day over another. What triggers our brain and/or our appetite for one specific food or meal?

Many different factors affect our food cravings. Some believe that you have cravings when your body is lacking a certain nutrient, and that these cravings are your body's way of influencing what we need to eat to make it satisfied. Certainly, some research studies support this idea, but you cannot limit your cravings to that factor alone.

Most people experience food cravings. In a study published in the journal *Appetite*, 97% of women and 68% of men reported having had food cravings on one or more occasions.

If your diet is monotonous, meaning that you tend to eat the same things repeatedly, a craving for something to add variety to your palate may result. Other factors that influence the foods we eat include taste, cost, advertising, time, religion, availability, personal preference, environment or emotions. In turn, the food we eat effects our health.

Some research shows that there is just as much psychology behind what we eat, as there is biology, if not more. For example, if you are in the habit of eating lunch at 11:30 a.m. whether you are hungry or not, you are eating lunch due to a psychological reaction rather than in response to symptoms of hunger (a biological response.) If you continue to eat, even though you are not hungry, you could experience weight gain and other unwanted health issues.

What does hungry feel like? Some describe hunger as a growling, rumbling sound in their stomach, feeling light headed, or dizzy, being easily irritated, having low energy, finding it difficult to concentrate or feeling nauseated. What does hunger feel like to you? In knowing how your body responds to hunger, you will be able to distinguish between eating because your body needs food and eating because your body wants (or craves) food.

What does *full* feel like? Some might describe it simply as content, while others describe it as a feeling of slight heaviness in their stomach. There is no right or wrong answer. Your body gives you the cue that you are full and you need to decide what you are going to do about it.

Now that you know how you feel when you are hungry or full, and you have an idea of how others might describe these feelings, why do you think your body craves specific foods during specific times of the day or when you are under stress?

How you feel has a lot to do with the food you crave when you are not physically hungry. When you eat to feed an emotion instead of meeting your physical need for food, you are engaging in emotional eating. There are a wide range of emotions that may lead to emotional eating including, stress, depression, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, and anger. Even though boredom and procrastination are not emotions, they are the most common reason people eat when they are not hungry. In these cases, food is used to pass time or put off doing something.

In an article authored by Dr. Tandalayo Kidd, *Emotional Appetite: The Food and Mood Connection*, the connection between our biological need for food and our emotional want of food is explained as it relates to brain chemistry. "Several chemicals in the brain that affect appetite also affect moods. For example, stress causes an elevation in brain chemicals (galanin and neuropeptide Y) that increase the desire for fatty foods and carbohydrates. Stress also tends to magnify cravings; therefore, some stressed people may eat a lot of chocolate because it has carbohydrates and fat in it. The carbohydrate (sugar) in the chocolate causes a release of serotonin and endorphins, which improve the mood and provide a pleasurable feeling." Because you get this "feel good" response when you engage in emotional eating, you tend to continue to indulge in the practice repeatedly, and in the example offered by Dr. Kidd, the food is chocolate. Kidd goes on to explain that the fat in the chocolate satisfies the elevated galanin levels.

Look at this snapshot glance of the characteristics for emotional and physical hunger:

Emotional	Physical
Sudden onset	Gradual onset
Eats to feed a feeling	Eats to feed an empty stomach
Craves specific foods	No specific cravings
Eats despite of fullness	Stops when full or satisfied

Now, consider what food you typically eat for your emotional eating and what triggers you to consume these foods. For example: "Procrastination – buttery microwave popcorn" or "Stress – chocolate-covered peanuts."

By learning how to identify eating habits by recognizing your emotional eating triggers, you can begin to change how and when you eat in a way that promotes better health. Instead of reaching for the chocolate covered peanuts, you can grab an apple. This fresh fruit can give you the crunch you get from the peanuts while satisfying your sweet tooth found in the chocolate. Make a list of other healthier options for foods to consume when faced with emotional eating. You will feel better both emotionally and physically when you take simple steps for healthier food patterns. To read the full article referenced above, look under the New Resources tab on the Geary County K-State Research & Extension website at: <https://www.geary.k-state.edu/health-home-family/>. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!