Should You (Mindfully) Indulge Your Cravings? Science Says Yes

5 MIN READ

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New research shows learning to work with your cravings may be one of the most powerful tools in your long-term health arsenal.

What if the secret to better appetite control isn’t restriction but inclusion?

A new two-year study published in ***Physiology & Behavior*** reveals that allowing yourself small portions of craved foods, rather than cutting them out entirely, might be a more effective way to reduce cravings and maintain weight loss over time.

This longitudinal trial from the University of Illinois tracked changes in weight and food cravings in adults who were overweight or obese. The results showed that those who included their favorite foods in a balanced meal, rather than avoiding them, lost more weight and experienced a more sustained reduction in cravings, particularly for sweets and high-fat foods.

Reducing Cravings Leads to Sustained Weight Loss

Food cravings are intense, specific desires to eat particular foods, usually high in fat, sugar, or carbs. Unlike hunger, which can be satisfied by a variety of foods, cravings are targeted and persistent. For many, cravings derail even the best dietary intentions, especially when fueled by stress or rigid food rules.

This two-year study from the University of Illinois examined 326 adults who were overweight or obese who were enrolled in a behavioral weight loss program. The researchers aimed to understand how food cravings change over time during weight

loss and weight maintenance, and what strategies might influence those changes.

The research revealed a clear pattern: reducing food cravings is associated with greater weight loss and successful weight maintenance.

Include Your Cravings, Don’t Avoid Them

Most notably, people who lost at least 5% of their body weight and kept it off for 24 months reported the greatest reduction in cravings, especially for sweets and high-fat foods.

And here’s where it gets interesting. One of the key strategies used to successfully decrease cravings was the “inclusion strategy,” which had people incorporate small, structured amounts of craved foods into their diets, rather than cutting them out entirely. In other words, it wasn’t about total restriction. It was about learning how to enjoy foods you love, mindfully and in moderation.

This approach helped reduce the intensity of cravings and supported long-term behavior change without relying on deprivation.

What Do We Know About Craving?

Dr. Judson Brewer, a neuroscientist and addiction psychiatrist at Brown University, offers a compelling framework for **understanding cravings**, not as personal failures but as predictable, learned loops.

Brewer outlines the three key elements of what he calls the “habit loop”: a trigger (such as stress or boredom), a behavior (like eating a cupcake), and a reward (temporary relief or pleasure). Over time, this loop becomes reinforced: “It’s often described as aversion to the unpleasant. And then we act to keep the pleasant going or to make the unpleasant things go away,” says Brewer.

Instead of trying to force change through willpower, Brewer suggests introducing **mindful awareness** to break the cycle. “Mindfulness comes in and drives this wedge of awareness in, such that we have space,” he explains. When we bring curiosity to the moment, rather than judgment or suppression, we can begin to see the craving clearly and the behavior often loses its grip. He adds: “Awareness is always available. It’s not about resisting. It’s about observing and choosing.”

Importantly, Brewer’s research reinforces that we don’t curb cravings through intense willpower or rigid restriction. It’s about self-compassion, awareness, and even a little joy.

How to Tame the Craving Mind

Brewer’s approach aligns closely with the behavioral guidance offered in the study: practice presence and curiosity in the moment a craving hits.

Here’s a micropractice adapted from Brewer’s framework:

TAMING THE CRAVING MIND: A MICROPRACTICE

- **Pause.** When a craving arises, stop and take three deep breaths. This is the beginning of awareness, a space between stimulus and response.
- **Name it.** Say to yourself, “This is a craving for [X].” Naming interrupts the automatic loop.
- **Feel it.** Notice where it lands in your body. Observe what craving feels like without acting on it.
- **Get Curious.** Ask: “What’s happening right now?” and “What would happen if I just stayed with this feeling?” Curiosity defuses the charge.
- **Decide.** Brewer emphasizes: “Instead of habitually reacting, we can take a pause, and

mindfully, or with awareness, choose a behavior rather than habitually reacting."

This process is about rewiring the loop with awareness, not force.

Gentle Reframes for Long-Term Success

Drawing from both the new study and Brewer's insights, we can begin to treat cravings not as emergencies, but as invitations to pause and investigate.

- **Reframe Cravings:** Rather than seeing cravings as the enemy, view them as signals, not commands. What are they asking for? Nourishment, relief, pleasure, or a pause?
- **Practice Gentle Allowance:** Instead of all-or-nothing, try "sometimes and small." Plan to enjoy a favorite food once or twice a week, mindfully and without guilt. The study showed that structured inclusion helped participants stay on track.
- **Watch the Loop:** People who lost the most weight also had the greatest reductions in cravings over time, which helped them maintain their progress. Less craving led to less overeating, which led to more weight loss. That's a positive feedback loop!

This study provides strong evidence that sustainable weight loss isn't about gritting your teeth. It's about knowing yourself, including your favorite foods strategically, and responding to cravings with compassion instead of control.

That's not indulgence. That's wisdom.

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