

Local

Stress may drive that chocolate craving

Your Health By: Tara Maltman-Just

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Easter brings with it an assortment of delightful delicacies. Whether mini-eggs, hot cross buns or that big old chocolate bunny, these sweets tend to be rich in sugar and craved all year long. What many don't know is these food cravings may be signalling more than a coming holiday season. Cravings can be a sign of stress, suggesting underlying needs the body is trying to address.

Recently, a patient of mine mentioned how she has been having trouble avoiding sugar. Five-year-old chocolate bunnies in her freezer were to remain frozen no more. Avoidance proved futile. And there were a number of reasons why.

Stress stimulates our bodies to crave sugar. It increases our main stress hormone, cortisol. And heightened cortisol has cascade effects on the function of insulin, hormones and the thyroid. Increased insulin, for example, results in a "sugar low" after a sweet treat, and fuels a vicious cycle resulting in a need to get another energy boost. Caffeine, carbs, sugar and chocolate are common go-tos. Instead of solving the issue (although the temporary high is unmistakable), they make it worse.

It is our natural tendency to treat ourselves on special occasions. It's habitual. And, many may argue, natural, and devoid of concern. After all, if you're not under stress, you shouldn't have to worry about persistent sweet cravings... or should you?

By exploring the components of our favourite chocolate rabbit -- whether Mr. Solid or Mr. Hollow -- we're in store for some fascinating findings. And I don't mean hidden candy eggs. Treats reinforce the reward pathways in our brains. This impacts our brain chemistry and our behaviour.

Chocolate also has opioid effects. It activates the same part of the brain as does morphine. It also contains two stimulating substances called theobromine, phenylethylamine, which are similar to caffeine and marijuana. This is the reason chocolate has pleasurable -- and highly addictive -- effects. Studies have shown sugar can be more addictive than cocaine. These goodies (depending on your perspective) are shouting messages to your body and brain. And I assure you, it's much louder than a (marshmallow) peep.

The first step to overcoming cravings is to identify that they exist, and then find out why. Your observations are fundamental to the treatment plan your practitioner will develop.

There may be many reasons why a person is craving foods such as sweets or carbs, but stress undoubtedly tops the list. Supporting stress-induced insulin spikes can be helpful, and is best achieved by combining protein and fat with each meal. This slows the peaks and troughs of glucose that drive that hamster-wheel of sugar addiction. A glycemic index food guide can be a useful tool in meal planning.

Above all, the best plan will consider your biochemical individuality, a detailed history and your personal health needs, whether physiologic, mental or spiritual. This way, you will not only overcome your unfulfilled cravings, but rise up to surpass stress in the holidays, and beyond.

Tara Maltman-Just is the executive clinician and licensed pharmacist at Vitality Integrative Medicine in Winnipeg.

www.vitalityintegrativemedicine.com

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