

Why is snacking addictive?

Have you ever wondered why you start snacking and can't stop? We are all different. Where some people manage on three meals a day, for some of us snacking is a regular thing – a way of eating outside traditional mealtimes. It is important to identify why you snack and what you snack on. Constant and unhealthy snacking is often the culprit of many diet related problems.

And what do we snack on? Were it only fruit, it would not have been a problem. Often though, we snack on junk food.

What is junk food – empty calories?

Junk food is defined as food that tastes good and that is high in calories, salt or sugar and has minimal nutritional value – empty calories. Unfortunately most “junk foods” contain high levels of fat, sugar, salt and other flavourings, which provide a good taste. Have you ever tried going cold turkey and cut out all sugary, high fat and salty snacks from the diet? Most people who have tried would tell you that at some point, they yearn for it.

Interestingly – a recent study trained mice to eat at a time when they normally wouldn't eat and found that food turns on body-clock genes in a specific area of the brain. Even when the food was not available, the genes continued to activate at the expected mealtime. The mice were set on a regular feeding schedule and examined their brain tissue. The mice soon fell into a pattern of searching for food two hours before each feeding time. The exact same thing happens to humans – snacking or eating constantly soon becomes a habit.

Snacking could also be linked to and caused by cravings.

Cravings are described as “a psychological state affected by outside influences such as the sight or smell of food, and by emotions, habits, moods, and imagination, rather than hunger”. Experts say that mental stress is more likely to cause people to snack than physical stress. Those who snack under stress are best described as “emotional eaters”, who unfortunately tend to turn to food as an escape from self-awareness, avoiding negative feelings by turning their attention to food.

If you want to knock your snacking habits on the head, try the following self-help guidelines:

- Keep a food diary for a week – this will allow you to identify exactly how often and on what you snack
- Don't cut out your favourite junk foods altogether – one step at a time. Try to cut down on either sugar or fat or salt, but not all three together. This is a more realistic goal.
- Moderation is the key – remember that all food, including junk food can form part of a healthy diet, but in **moderation**.
- If you know you are an “emotional eater”, seek professional help, which will help you to change your behaviour regarding eating.