Your food cravings probably aren’t a sign of a hidden nutrient deficiency
By Kimberly Gillan

Cravings can take over the most rational of brains, forcing us to do anything to get our hands on that chocolate bar/burger/Diet Coke. You might have heard chocolate cravings signal magnesium deficiencies, or that hankerings for red meat means you're low in iron or protein. But Dr Vincent Ho, from the University of Western Sydney's School of Medicine, says there's little evidence that our cravings are so explicit. More likely, says Dr Ho, is that we have a psychological "conditioned" response where we associate particular foods with happy times, which makes us want to replicate them.

"Food cravings are an intense desire to consume a particular food that is quite difficult to resist; different of course from hunger, which can be satisfied by any food," he tells Coach.

"It's not so much a physiological [occurrence] as much as a sociocultural one." Dr Ho points to the fact chocolate is the number one reported North American craving, while only 1 percent of Egyptian men and 6 percent of Egyptian women have felt a similar craving, and that Japanese women more commonly report sushi and rice cravings.

"People thought maybe chocolate cravings were caused due to the component called phenyl-ethylamine, the so-called substance involved in romantic love," he says.

"But we know that's not the case because other foods like cheddar cheese and salami have much higher amounts but don't cause anywhere [near] the same amount of cravings as chocolate.

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"Phenyl-ethylamine [also] doesn't appear to cross the blood-brain barrier into the brain either, so it's really a myth."
Dr Ho says the famous "Pavlov's dog" study gave a powerful insight into how cravings are conditioned. The 18th century scientist noted that dogs salivate when food is put in front of them, then he started adding a bell when producing their food bowl. In time, simply ringing the bell was enough to induce salivation, even if no food was shown.
"In a very similar way, there is that sort of conditioning theory that is thought to underpin food cravings," Dr Ho explains.
"If having chocolate is associated with a happy time, that becomes a very strong association. You could be driving and eating chocolate, and in the future, just the act of driving may be enough to trigger the food craving because of the conditioning response."
Stress and our gut bacteria are also thought to influence our food cravings.
Naturopath Andrea Strand uses her clients' cravings to get an insight into their health, but says cravings often signal a broader diet imbalance rather than a specific nutrient need.
"It might be that a person eats and craves high sugary foods [because] they are not getting the nutrients required to help stop the sugar craving," she explains.
"The ideal diet for blood sugar regulation is lots of vegetables, two pieces of fruit a day and good protein sources at breakfast, lunch and dinner."
If you get those elements right then Strand says your sugar cravings should naturally diminish.
"Often people come in with sugar cravings and by making dietary changes, supporting their adrenal glands and helping them develop better sleep hygiene, within one to two weeks, their cravings are gone," she says.

**How can you get rid of cravings?**

Adopting a balanced, healthy diet is one of the best things you can do to "crowd out" the unhealthy foods.
"If you decrease the frequency of consuming the foods you commonly crave, you get a decrease in cravings of those foods," Dr Ho explains.
"If you were to have chocolate twice a month instead of every week, that is going to reduce your craving for chocolate."

Secondly, he suggests using mindfulness to "decouple" the brain association by acknowledging your craving is simply a thought you are having.
"A study found that people who adopted mindfulness were three times more likely to abstain from chocolate than participants using cognitive behavioural therapy [CBT] techniques, which involves challenging inaccurate thoughts and replacing them with more accurate ones," he says.

Thirdly, he suggests trying to create positive, happy associations with healthy foods to "sub in" better cravings. So that might mean having some beautiful roast vegetables with a family meal or some hommus and vegie sticks when socialising with your friends.
At the same time, Strand says trying to eat a balanced diet encompassing lots of whole foods from nature should ensure your body is well nourished and less likely to present niggling cravings.
"Chromium, found in beef, poultry, wholegrains and vegetables, as well as magnesium, found in spinach, quinoa, almonds, cashews and dark chocolate, are both required for sugar uptake," she says.
"So if you eat plenty of those foods, you might not get those sweet cravings."