Food and mood

Don’t ignore this meaningful relationship

James LaValle, RPh, ND

Food affects mood, influencing the production of neurotransmitters in the brain. Our moods, in turn, affect our desires for certain foods.

Though there are several neurotransmitters involved, most of the relationship between food and mood centres on serotonin, the neurotransmitter responsible for feeling calm and relaxed and for experiencing a sense of well-being. Serotonin is also needed for sleep.

Carb cravings
Serotonin is formed in the brain from the amino acid tryptophan after we eat carbohydrates. While some carbohydrate food intake is needed to keep normal serotonin production, the foods that lead to the greatest serotonin production—starches and sugars—need to be eaten in moderation in order to control body weight and diabetes risk. Many people today crave starches, such as bread and potatoes, and sugary foods, leading to excessive intake. This eating pattern, often called comfort-food craving, may be driven by high levels of chronic stress.

Chronic stress leads to the production of excess stress hormones in the body, primarily cortisol. When cortisol is produced, it inhibits serotonin production. We feel more anxious and depressed when serotonin levels drop and sleep is disrupted. When sleep is disturbed due to low serotonin, cortisol levels are increased and serotonin levels are depleted. This becomes a vicious cycle associated with insulin resistance and weight gain.
Most of us have occasionally experienced increased cravings for comfort foods during times of stress or when feeling depressed or anxious. However, under chronic stress, many people experience intense starch and sugar cravings daily. Not giving in to these cravings is almost impossible, since there is a strong physiological underpinning to them. Stress management is key to reducing these food cravings.

**Stress management, naturally**

It is sometimes difficult to avoid stress. Some natural remedies, such as extracts from the bark of the *Phellodendron amurense* and *Magnolia officinalis* trees, have been shown to control anxiety and the symptoms associated with it and reduce stress-related food cravings.

The dietary supplement 5-HTP (5-hydroxytryptophan) can help to reduce stress-related food cravings as well. In the body, the essential amino acid tryptophan is converted to 5-HTP, which is then converted to serotonin. Taking 5-HTP can enhance serotonin synthesis, aiding the body in sleep, reducing mood disorders, and promoting weight loss. The more serotonin levels are maintained, the fewer the cravings for sweets and carbohydrates. Doses range from 50 mg to 300 mg per day. If you are on antidepressants, make sure that you consult your health care professional before using 5-HTP.

Good nutrition, sufficient sleep, and regular exercise can help you manage stress and reduce those killer cravings for comfort foods.

Jim LaValle, RPh, ND, is a licensed pharmacist, certified clinical nutritionist, and doctor of naturopathic medicine. He is in a professional consulting practice at the Living Longer Institute in Cincinnati.