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Emotional Eating
Factsheet

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Constantly grazing?

Regularly reaching for the biscuit tin? Health and diet are proving particularly difficult to manage at the moment, as our regular exercise routines are disrupted by lockdown, and many of us are working from home with constant access to our kitchens - and the treats within.

What's emotional eating?

Also referred to as comfort eating, it's where food is used to soothe or suppress negative emotions such as isolation, anger, boredom, or stress. It can often result in overeating and have a direct relation to weight gain and self-esteem.

Often emotional eating ignores feelings of physical hunger that come from an empty stomach. The most common foods craved are usually ultra-processed, like biscuits, crisps, chocolate and ice cream. These foods are scientifically engineered to quickly target the pleasure receptors in our brains.

Tips to snack less

1

Know your trigger
One of the best ways to identify the patterns behind emotional eating, is to keep track with a food and mood diary. Once you've pinpointed your triggers, the next step is finding healthier ways to feed your feelings.

2

Find a new outlet
The best tasks to take our mind off food are cognitively challenging ones; so going for a walk, meditation, or taking a bath may not be that effective. Try something that engages your brain like a sudoku puzzle, crossword, a brain training app, calling a friend, a board game, or podcast.

3

Get prepared
Prepare healthy snacks like salt and sugar-free popcorn, nuts or sliced veggies and divide into containers. Consider these your emergency snack packages, or just your healthy snack options ongoing. You can also make a note of different scenarios of when you tend to snack and list alternative activities to do instead.

4

Take away the guilt
If emotional eating happens, it's important not to feel guilty. One way to do this is to avoid labelling food as 'good', 'bad', 'treat' or 'sin' as this can encourage a negative eating cycle. Instead, use categories like foods we enjoy every day and foods we enjoy less often.

Eat less from a box and more from the earth

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Water is your best friend

Sometimes when you reach for food, it could actually be your body telling you that you're thirsty. So before grabbing a snack from the pantry, sip some water and wait for a little to see if the cravings pass.

Studies have shown that the majority of people who upped their daily water intake by one, two, or three cups cut up to 205 daily calories, as well as reduced their consumption of saturated fat, sugar, sodium, and cholesterol.

Less sugar, more energy

In its natural state, sugar is relatively harmless and our bodies need it to function. It's found in fruits, vegetables and dairy as a compound called fructose or lactose. The problem comes when sugar is added to foods during processing for flavour, texture, or colour.

Eating too much added sugar has many health effects, the most obvious being weight gain. Sugar drives up your insulin levels, and messes with your metabolism and mood.

Healthy food swaps

Instead of this	Try this
Fizzy drinks	Water
Coffee or tea (with sugar)	Coffee or tea (w/out sugar)
Cordial	Flavour water with mint or fresh lemon
Sugar-coated cereal	Wholegrain cereal
Flavoured yoghurt	Natural Greek yoghurt
Sugary popcorn	Natural popcorn
Cake	Malt or fruit loaf
Chocolate	Sugar-free jelly
Bread and dips	Chopped veg and hummus
Biscuits	Natural nut butter on apple slices
Crisps	Rice cakes
Ice cream	Blended frozen banana

Spending longer indoors due to lockdown?

Add some vitamin D-rich foods like oily fish, eggs and cereals to your food prep, to keep bones and muscles healthy.

If you've tried addressing your cravings or comfort eating without success, you may want to talk to your doctor.

Sometimes, cravings for certain foods can be a sign of an underlying health condition. For example, you might crave certain foods if you're deficient in essential vitamins and minerals.