

Food Satisfaction - How to curb cravings and feel full longer

by Isaac Eliaz, MD, LAc

Sometimes we eat a great meal, but don't feel satisfied afterward. The body keeps telling us it needs more, and soon we're rooting through the refrigerator for that "perfect" food to calm the cravings.

Why does this happen? It all comes down to satiety—the feeling that we've had enough to eat. If the brain isn't getting the appropriate signals, regardless of how much was consumed, we feel unsatisfied. And much of it is related to the types of foods we eat.

It's not only about how quickly our blood sugar spikes and crashes after we eat carbohydrates, although this "glycemic score" also influences hunger. Simple carbs are high on the glycemic index, producing blood sugar crashes that trigger cravings. But beyond glycemic ratings of carbs, certain foods simply fail to satisfy us for long, while others can help us feel full for hours. Herbs and nutrients can also contribute to satiety. By choosing wisely, we can support good nutrition and all-day satisfaction at the same time.

More calories = more cravings

Though it may seem counterintuitive, one of the best ways to boost satiety is to avoid calorie-dense foods, like fried calamari, fatty meats, and cheesecake. We feel full after eating these rich foods, but we may not feel really satisfied. Cravings return shortly.

On the other hand, larger quantities of foods lower in calories but higher in nutrients can trigger satiety, allowing us to feel full longer. These foods are also low on the glycemic index, which means they help stabilize blood sugar and prevent us from crashing soon after we eat.

In this approach, nutrient-dense, fiber-filled fruits and vegetables are excellent foods for satiety. Bean sprouts are high on the list, and whole grains, legumes, and lean protein are next. On the other hand, foods on the upper end of the calorie-density scale, like fatty meats, cheeses, and sweets, are much more likely to trigger hunger shortly after eating.

The "satiety index" of common foods, created by Australian researcher Susanna Holt, PhD, offers a guideline to help choose foods that will provide the most satisfaction. This rating system predicts how full you will feel after eating 240 calories of a common food such as a banana or cookie, and how soon after you'll feel hungry again. In general, the more lean protein, water, and/or fiber a food contains, the longer it can satisfy. The more fats, sugars, and calories a food contains, the sooner you're likely to feel hungry again.

Nutritional supplements

For years, the mineral chromium has been used by weight lifters to build muscle. However, it may also reduce feelings of hunger. A study by the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Louisiana showed that chromium may have a direct effect on the brain's perception of satiety. Chromium also helps to balance blood glucose levels and support metabolic health.

Another supplement that may improve food satisfaction is fenugreek, a fibrous herb commonly found in Indian food and herbal medicine. Fenugreek supports hormonal and metabolic balance, and also aids in glucose and insulin function. Researchers found that fenugreek fiber significantly increases satiety.

Alginates, which are extracted from brown seaweed, showed similar results in another study. They can also be effective in combating hunger when combined with pectin. A study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found a beverage with this combination increased satiety. And most of us need only look in our cupboards to find a box of green tea. Researchers in Sweden found that the beverage also increased satiety.

Mindful eating

It's not just how much we consume, but what we eat, when we eat, and how we eat. Eating slowly over 30 to 40 minutes and chewing food longer helps balance neuro-endocrine signals and allows us to feel full with fewer calories.

By planning ahead and making slight adjustments, we can optimize nutrition, minimize cravings, and enhance our overall health and wellness.

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