

Managing food cravings

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If you are thinking of reaching for that bar of chocolate or a bag of pretzels, stop yourself before you give in to your cravings.

Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist from Gleneagles Hospital, gives us the lowdown on unhealthy cravings and how to break the cycle.

Why do we crave for junk food?

For some of us, stressful periods could bring upon episodes of binge eating. Indulging in food is one of the ways your body tries to cope with stress.

Dr Lim said: "Foods that are high in sugar, salt and fat are often considered more tasty and savoury. This is likely due to the fact that sugar, salt and fat were not readily available in prehistoric times. Humans have since evolved to identify these ingredients

as tasty. This is why they are highly sought after."

Using food to feel better

There is no denying that eating junk food can be pleasurable. But keep in mind that by doing so, you are telling your body it is fine to cope with stress through unhealthy snacking.

He said: "There is a reward pathway in our brain which is activated when we engage in activities that we like, such as eating. Snacking when you are stressed out may release dopamine, a neurotransmitter which helps increase pleasure sensations in the brain. It helps one feel better at times of stress.

"This feeling can be similar to that experienced by alcoholics and gamblers. It may explain why some do become addicted to food."

Don't miss a meal

If you feel guilty about snacking on

junk food, remember that skipping meals to compensate for excess calories by snacking is not a right approach.

In fact, it could lead to even more intense cravings, causing you to eat more.

He said: "The brain and the body seek to achieve homeostasis, a tendency towards a stable equilibrium. If one is to miss or delay a meal, the body craves for food and may increase food intake to achieve this balance."

Have adequate meals

Don't go on extreme diets. Dr Lim said that individuals may end up having a carbohydrate, sugar or even salt craving and rebound. This may result in them bingeing even more.

He said: "The best way to break the cycle is to have adequate proper meals. Most of the calories can be consumed in the morning instead of



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the evening as one has the entire day to burn them off."

Burn off stress

When you have the urge to snack, ask yourself if you are really hungry.

He said: "Learn to manage your stress well. For example, exercising is a good way to maintain your weight and manage your stress."