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The Real Truth about your Sweet Tooth

By Brian B. Carter, MS, LAc

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Question: My mom always said my sweet-tooth was to blame for my weight problem (I can't seem to lose weight!), but my best friend says I should listen to my body and eat whatever I want because it knows what I need. I'm not sure what to do! Does Oriental Medicine have any wisdom about diet that could help me?

– Candice M

Dear Candice,

A common dietary misconception is that if you crave a food or drink, then it must contain a vitamin, mineral or other substance that your body is lacking. The underlying principle is the rather New Age myth that our bodies possesses an innate wisdom, and if we can get in touch with and listen to our bodies, they will guide us to health, freedom, and happiness. I'm here to tell you there may be some truth to that, but it's not that simple!

Idea #1: Your body knows what it needs and that's why you're craving it. The human body does sometimes tell us what we need to eat or drink, especially when it is relatively healthy. We get thirsty for water when dehydrated, crave protein when our activity level increases, or carbohydrates when we are more mentally active. In an extreme situation, pica (eating non-nutritive substances like dirt or paper) may be a desperate attempt to fill a mineral deficiency.

Idea #2: When your body is out of whack (yes, that's the technical way to describe it), you may crave the thing that makes it worse. Maybe you're craving that ice cream because your body needs calcium, or maybe it fits with your other cravings for candy and soda into a pattern of sugar addiction. Oops, I said addiction didn't I? Sorry, it won't happen again.

But here I must go into Chinese Medicine for a minute to explain the basic point of my article, which is that sometimes your body knows what it needs, and other times it is stuck in a vicious cycle wherein it craves exactly what is worst for it.

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Chinese Medicine and Food Cravings

Chinese dietary therapy is as complex as Chinese herbal medicine, which is extremely complex (go ask some Chinese Medicine students and they'll tell you all about it). Instead of going into that level of detail, we can talk more broadly from a Five Element perspective and still get some good insights.

Five Phase Relationships

Chinese medicine talks about a system of 5 phase/element relationships. Each phase has an associated season, emotion, taste, organ, etc.

The sweet taste is associated with the Earth phase. Let's talk about the Earth type person and how their food cravings work.

The Earth person tends to be a bit overweight, worries, is easily overwhelmed, and craves sweets. The taste associated with the Earth type is sweetness. In CM, this works two ways: small amounts of sweets can strengthen the Earth element, but overdoses can injure it. Both physical and mental digestion are affected. When the earth element is weakened, the appetite decreases, digestion is hindered (there may be tiredness or bloating after eating), sweets are craved in great degree and amount, the stool becomes loose, there is a tendency toward worry (mental and emotional indigestion), and fatigue sets in.

As I said, small amounts of sweetness can strengthen the Earth. In CM, herbs such as cinnamon and licorice are employed for this purpose. These herbs are sweet— not super-sweet like processed sugar, but naturally, moderately sweet. Someone with an Earth imbalance might not consider these herbs 'sweet,' not like ice cream or soda or candy. This is because the body has gotten off-kilter into a vicious cycle of craving exactly the wrong thing: huge amounts of supersweets.

Two other oft-consumed sweets are alcohol and carbohydrates. Studies of alcoholics have revealed that they have extreme sugar-addictions, that part of the alcoholic withdrawal is due to a drastic reduction in sugar intake, and that subsequent coffee, smoking, and sweet consumption may be a way of preventing food cravings. One study showed that nutritional therapy including low-sugar diet decreased alcohol cravings. Much has been made of carbohydrate addiction, and no or low-carb diets (including the Atkins diet) have been among the recent dietary fads.

With all of this talk about how sweets can be bad for you, let emphasize that research also shows that preference for sweet taste is innately human, and that avoiding sweets leads to an even greater sweet-craving!

The Solution?

The best thing to do would be to visit a Chinese Medicine (CM) practitioner a few times, get a personalized herbal formula for your imbalance, and take it with discipline. Some practitioners are extreme— they want you to change everything right away, re-arrange your diet, stop eating all the 'bad' things, take lots of herbs, and see them weekly so that they can regularly shame you into healthy living.

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As a self-confessing coffee addict and former smoker, I understand how difficult it can be to change dietary and lifestyle habits. My belief is that acupuncture, herbs, and dietary therapies exist to help you make the transition from imbalance to well-being both possible and comfortable. Real change takes time; moving too fast can lead to short term mega-progress but ultimately result in relapse and a net gain of zero. My point: take your time, change a few things, and stick with it. Be nice to yourself not only in committing to your own well-being, but also in allowing yourself to progress imperfectly, to be human, to make mistakes.

Best wishes in your journey of health!

Brian

Acupuncturist, herbalist, and medical professor Brian B. Carter founded the alternative health megasite The Pulse of Oriental Medicine (<http://www.PulseMed.org/>). He is the author of the book "Powerful Body, Peaceful Mind: How to Heal Yourself with Foods, Herbs, and Acupressure" (November, 2004). Brian speaks on radio across the country, and has been quoted and interviewed by

Real Simple, Glamour, and ESPN magazines.

Tips and Tricks for Introducing Solids to Your Baby

By Gary Hendricks

Helping your child move from breast milk or formula to solids is a milestone for both you and your baby. However, it can be challenging for some parents. Here are some tips and tricks I've compiled for introducing solid foods to your baby. Do remember, however, that you should follow your pediatrician's advice if you're in doubt.

Start with fruits One tip I've heard from various is to start with fruits. Use really ripe bananas, mashed with a fork. Or sweet potatoes (baked, with the insides scooped out).

Use a baby food grinder You can try small bits of real rice, mixed with meats (without seasonings). The meat should be meshed with baby food grinder (you can find these pretty cheap).

Don't feed your baby directly from the jar This is an interesting tip I've heard from experienced mothers. Feeding your baby directly from the jar is not a good idea. Their saliva can mix with the food and make it taste bad. Put the food in a mug rather than a bowl so that you can feed baby more easily.

Keep away the sweet tooth Try not to give baby sweet stuff at this stage. Deliberately give them vegetables before fruits to keep away that sweet tooth.

Wait for the first tooth It is a good idea to wait until your baby gets his / her first tooth before even thinking of starting solids. One baby (I heard) got his first tooth at 5 months and began showing interest in what his father was eating shortly thereafter. At about 6 months, he was reaching for his parents' food.

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Starting your baby on solids need not be a difficult task. Hopefully the above tips will help you somewhat when that time arrives for your baby.

Gary Hendricks is the editor of

, a hobby website offering articles on

parenting, baby care and baby products.

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