

Food and Mood: Craving Chocolate is Biological

How certain foods might affect our mood generates a lot of interest. Women, in particular, want to understand the link between food and mood. Media reports frequently claim that dietary changes will eliminate food cravings, improve mood, or cure symptoms of PMS (premenstrual syndrome).

So, what are the facts about women, food and mood? Researchers have speculated that certain foods and nutrients may influence mood. In reality, most reports on food intake, especially chocolate, are anecdotal. Therefore, we should ask the question: Does food intake affect mood or does mood affect intake? Women most frequently crave

chocolate. People often believe that chocolate is craved because of the bioactive (the

effect of a given agent, such as a vaccine, upon a living organism) substances it contains. However, these substances also occur in the other foods— including pickled herring, cheddar cheese, and pineapple— and people seldom crave these foods. Studies have tested various theories for the biological basis of chocolate craving. The results suggest that people crave chocolate for its sensory

properties. Chocolate tastes good and has a good mouth feel! Little science evidence actually exists that chocolate consumption improves mood. Some women who crave sweets report negative, rather than positive, mood reactions to satisfying the craving. In one study, self-described chocolate “addicts” were more depressed and tense than non-chocolate “addicts”. Also, chocolate consumption— in the “addicts” increased guilt and did not improve mood.

tists have proposed many theories for why food cravings exist. One reason is food deprivation, such as when a person follows a calorie restricted diet. Another theory is the lack of specific nutrient in the diet. For example,

freshly baked bread. Feelings, ideas, and beliefs about food that result from cultural conditioning can also influence food cravings. People often crave pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving day and popcorn at the movies. And what would

Valentine's Day be without



We all experience food cravings at one time or another. A food craving is often defined as an intense desire for a particular food or type of food. The lack of a scientific definition for

some believe that chocolate is craved for its magnesium content. Research findings for both theories is that people crave certain foods because they contain certain substances that influence brain chemistry. The net result is a feeling of well-being. According to this theory, bioactive substances such as the amino acid tryptophan, and even dietary carbohydrates, increase the concentration of serotonin in the brain. Increased brain serotonin, in turn, produces a calming effect and elevates mood.

Less dramatic theories for food cravings relate to the sensory properties of a food and to psychosocial or cultural factors. People may crave a certain food simply because they enjoy its taste, texture, or aroma, for example

out the romance of chocolate?

Food intake appears to increase premenstrually but the causes of food cravings or the usefulness of specific foods or nutrients to improve mood are unknown.

A high-carbohydrate, low-protein meal appears to improve mood in women with PMS, but few studies show this same effect will occur in other women.

Women most likely crave carbohydrates and chocolate for their sensory properties and positive emotional associations, not for the nutrients or bioactive compounds they contain.

Finally, women who develop and practice healthy eating habits are better able to manage food cravings throughout their life stages.

Ask the Chef

Q: I would love to indulge in some chilly, tasty lowfat frozen yogurt after my delicious entree at McEwen.

A: Because of the many requests for frozen yogurt, we are looking into purchasing a frozen yogurt machine for either upstairs or downstairs McEwen.

