

Physical Hunger vs. Cravings



By Margaret Furtado, M.S., R.D. - Posted on Tue, Jan 26, 2010, 4:18 pm PST



I teach a 6-month class for my clients who are working toward having bariatric/weight-loss surgery. One of the topics I love to teach is how to tell the difference between physical hunger and psychological hunger, or cravings.

I'm sure all of you can list some signs of genuine physical hunger, including a rumbling stomach, irritability, headache, dizziness, and difficulty concentrating. Our bodies are begging us to give them food (and, often, liquids) and yet we sometimes ignore the clues.

Physical hunger, however, is definitely not something you want to ignore because, among other things, it could cause your blood sugar to plummet dangerously. And if you're working on weight loss, going without food for too long could diminish your impulse control. In other words, if your desk starts looking tasty, it's going to be harder to control what you eat and how fast you eat it! Many times, if you wait until you're ravenous, you'll eat unhealthy foods just because they happen to be fast or right there in front of you.

Cravings or psychological hunger don't carry the telltale signs above; cravings can even go away if you suddenly get a call that distracts you or if you find something exciting to do. When you're having a craving, it could be the result of **stress**, lack of sleep, grief, boredom, or maybe something as straightforward as watching a brownie that's gushing chocolate being pulled apart on your TV screen.

So how do you tell the difference between cravings and hunger if you're not sure? Try the "apple test." Would an apple satisfy your hunger or must you have the gooey brownie you just saw on TV? If your hunger is truly physical, chances are you'll go with the apple.

If you suspect your "hunger" is really just a craving, make a list of 5 things that you love to do with your hands or that can keep you engaged and distracted:

- Play computer games
- Use your Wii Fit®
- Give yourself a manicure/pedicure
- Knit or sew
- Jump rope
- Read a good book or magazine
- Play with your children
- Walk/play with your pet
- Go outside for a walk/run/jog/skip
- Grab your iPod and listen to music
- Insert your favorite activity here!

Next, choose one of these activities and tell yourself that you must continue doing it for 30 minutes before you can satisfy your craving. (Except maybe for jumping rope!) Thirty minutes later, chances are your cravings will have petered out. Keep this list handy and continue to add new suggestions to it.