

# Managing eating triggers



Your healthy eating routine is bang on target until... an eating trigger derails your diet. It doesn't have to be this way when you use the tips and strategies below to outsmart your triggers.

## What are eating triggers?

An eating trigger is anything that prompts a desire or craving to consume foods or drinks **you are trying to limit or avoid**.

Triggers come in many forms, ranging from hunger and the sight or smell of food to emotions and feelings like stress. Workmates and family can also be the source of eating triggers, if they suggest or expose you to treats.

## How to manage triggers

Follow the three steps below to reduce the impact of unwanted eating triggers:

### 1. Identify your triggers

Think about what happened before a food craving. Did you see an advertisement for fast food? Were you in a particular mood? Did your partner say chocolate? Or was it a specific time of the day or night? Make a list of your obvious eating triggers.



### 2. Remove the trigger

Can you make the trigger go away? For example, by not keeping treats in the house or switching off notifications from a pizza delivery app.

When travelling by car, can you use the toilet at a park rather than run a gauntlet of temptations at MacDonaldis?

Other examples, include avoiding the chip and confectionary aisles at supermarkets and not grocery shopping when hungry.

### 3. Respond differently

Some eating triggers are harder to get rid of. Seeing billboards for junk food when driving or experiencing life's stresses are more challenging. This is when a new, pre-planned response is useful.

#### It works by saying,

"If \_\_\_\_\_ [insert trigger].  
Then, I will \_\_\_\_\_ [insert your alternative to the treat]."

For example, "If I crave sweets or chocolate after passing a convenience store, I will have a banana that I have brought with me."

There are two things working for you here. You've already packed a healthy snack to eat and you've rehearsed in your head when you'll eat it.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

People who eat healthy don't always have stronger willpower.

They may have simply removed more eating triggers from their lives. Or established positive habits to automatically respond to eating triggers differently.

#### RESOURCES

For healthy meal and snack ideas to have ready for when you feel an eating trigger coming on, check out the Meal and Snack Ideas Fact Sheet on the NSW Ambulance Families page:

[www.ambulance.nsw.gov.au/fonassn](http://www.ambulance.nsw.gov.au/fonassn)

Healthy Eating section at [makehealthynormal.nsw.gov.au](http://makehealthynormal.nsw.gov.au)

Also find simple recipes and food ideas at [nomoneynotime.com.au](http://nomoneynotime.com.au)

#### ADVICE & SUPPORT



#### **Get Healthy Information & Coaching Service**

For free NSW Health telephone-based coaching on healthy eating and other lifestyle goals go to: [gethealthynsw.com.au](http://gethealthynsw.com.au)

Speak to your **General Practitioner** to make a plan for support, including referral to an Exercise Physiologist or an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD).



# Managing eating triggers

Some more examples... *"If I arrive at a party or BBQ and there are unlimited fatty snacks, I'll get a small plate and move away from the food table."*

*"If I start to feel like snacking right before dinner I'll tell myself I can wait 10-15 minutes to eat."*

*"If someone at work offers me cake, I'll say I already had some earlier, thanks."*

You get the pattern here. **Behavioural scientists call this "if-then" method, making an implementation intention.** It's a go-to technique to help make healthy eating easier.

## Beating boredom

What can you do about boredom? Don't get bored. This is easier said than done, especially if you are a paramedic waiting at hospital, staged near a job or have down-time on station.

When boredom results in eating repeatedly, the links in this negative chain grow stronger. But they can be broken.

**Boredom > Craving > Eating**



**The trick is to break the trigger-craving-eating chain with a new and improved "if-then" plan.**

*"If I'm becoming bored, then I will..."*

Ideas to place here are: focusing on something that needs to be done (e.g. work, cleaning), doing some physical stretches, looking up something useful on your phone, reading a brief news article or phoning a friend.

Any of these options may be enough to distract you from food.

If you notice boredom setting in at the same place each time, move to another room or space. Changing your location can be easier than making boredom disappear.

And be aware that sometimes boredom is the feeling when other related emotions are being experienced. For example, are you nervous about something or procrastinating?

## Reducing stress

The stress-craving-eating (or drinking) cycle is reinforced by the biological link between stress and cravings.

Stress increases levels of the hormone cortisol, which impairs appetite regulation in your brain's hypothalamus and increases the desirability of junk food.

Stress also reduces the ability of the front 'thinking' part of your brain (the prefrontal cortex) to use logic to over-ride craving impulses. It's harder to say no when stressed.

To reduce stress cravings either reduce the source of stress (the stressor) or change how you respond to stress.

Eliminating stressors, like heavy work schedules or some relationships may not be immediately possible. But it's worth asking yourself, how can I adjust my schedule, or try to improve my relationship?

Next, an if-then statement can help you deal with the stress craving;

*"If I notice a craving coming on due to stress, then I will know I don't have to use food or drink as my stress reducer. I've got other choices."*

Choices include: deep breathing, practising a mindful moment or going for a walk. For some people vigorous physical activity helps to release emotion and energy.

Another strategy can be to choose a healthier indulgence. A chocolate-dipped snack ball instead of a family-sized block of chocolate.

## Becoming less tired

Sleep often gets bumped down the priority list with life's mounting demands. But, if tiredness is your guaranteed eating trigger it's time to re-evaluate.

Lack of sleep and poor sleep interferes with the healthy function of appetite hormones, ramping up levels of ghrelin and reducing leptin.

In combination, this makes you more susceptible to any sight, smell or thought of junk food.

The easier said than done answer is to sleep better. But it could keep food cravings below a threshold that you don't notice and act on.





# Managing eating triggers

Getting better sleep involves; a good sleep routine, a good sleep space, and what you eat or drink?

Set an alarm for bed time, avoid device screens before bed, and ensure a cool, darkened room for sleep. Give caffeine and alcohol a miss when you need a good, long sleep.

## Moods and emotions



Boredom and stress are not the only feelings that can act as food triggers. Other moods, including anxiety, anger and experiencing depression can lead to emotional eating.

It can be challenging to work out what the real eating trigger is. But if you notice a recurring pattern, chances are an eating trigger has formed.

For example, ***“If I’m anxious, I eat chocolate.”***

You may consider working on non-food ways to manage emotions and even getting support to do it.

And when you still eat a treat, it could be a small chocolate fix, rather than a fill up of chocolate.

## Relationships



Good nutrition goes well until a workmate or family member says, ***“How about a doughnut!”*** Then your diet goes south.

Significant others, whether at work or home can undermine your best eating intentions. And they often don't realise.

If your partner is the trigger, you may choose not to remove them!

But you could explain to them the impact of “treat talk” and agree to only mention treats once a week or less. If no one mentions or brings treats, your trigger doesn't go off.

## Role of exercise

Physical activity can improve your ability to resist unhealthy eating triggers.

Exercise trains our brain (as well as muscles) by strengthening neuronal links in the prefrontal cortex of your brain.

This enhances your rational ability to prioritise the healthiness of food over the impulsiveness of tastes and flavours.



## Breaking the cycle

To manage eating triggers, remove or limit exposure to the trigger. And where this is not possible, put in place personal if-then plans as your rehearsal for success.

Managing stress, getting enough sleep and being active all work together to reduce the chances you'll notice or act on an eating trigger.

**And every time you eat well, your brain will help you do it again and the habit will grow stronger.**

## Your turn

What are your main eating triggers?

Create your own if-then plans	
“If _____.	_____.
Then, I will _____.	_____.
“If _____.	_____.
Then, I will _____.	_____.
“If _____.	_____.
Then, I will _____.	_____.