

Episode 064:

Hunger vs. Cravings:

The Truth About One...and How to Handle the Other

This is the TD Fitness Podcast with Coach T, episode number 64.

Welcome to the TD Fitness Podcast, giving you ways to live a healthy lifestyle without giving up the things that make life worth living. And now, your host, certified health coach and personal trainer, Coach T.

What's up, guys, Coach T. from TD Fitness here. And in this episode, we are talking hunger versus cravings, the truth about hunger and how to handle cravings. The two are related, but they're different, right? So, I want to dive into that in this episode. So, what prompted this, what got me thinking about it was a couple of things that I've experienced really over my lifetime, right? First, now that I have kids, I've realized that there are a lot of things that my kids do that I did when I was young. But I also realized that I do a lot of things as a parent that my parents did when I was a kid, right? So, my daughter recently came to me and she said, "Daddy, I'm hungry." I get this all the time from my daughters, right? And what immediately comes to mind every time they tell me or my wife that is what my father used to tell me. I would say, "Dad, I'm hungry," and he would say, "Son, you don't know what hunger is."

And I didn't really know what he meant at the time. But I think back now, and my dad grew up with five other siblings in a very small home. They didn't have much. So, very humble beginnings, if you will. So, I think about that. And I'm thinking, "Okay, maybe my dad did know what hunger was, right?" And he also served in the military in Korea, so I'm assuming maybe he had some experience with what hunger actually was throughout the course of his life. But looking back on my life, I can honestly say that I have never really been hungry, meaning I've never been in a situation where I didn't know where my next meal was coming from. And I'd venture to say that that's probably the case for most of you listening here, though I could be wrong. But when we think of hunger, we typically think in terms of hours. That's probably what my daughter was thinking. She was just thinking, at least subconsciously, "I haven't eaten in a while. I'm kind of hungry."

I'll tell you that the human body can actually survive for about three weeks without food. And again, I'm assuming none of us have really thought about hunger on the order of weeks or even days without food. But it's interesting the way we think about hunger and the way we refer to being hungry and to having hunger. So, let me give you another example. If you've ever visited a Brazilian Steakhouse, this is one of our favorite places to eat, a Brazilian Churrascaria, they call it. It's a steakhouse where essentially you pay a set price for a buffet meal. But what happens is, when you sit down, they will bring you different types of meats cooked in several different ways. So, you could have bacon wrapped filet mignon, for example, or pork cooked a certain way, or even lamb chops, all kinds of things. They bring it out on these skewers and carve it right off of there directly onto your plate.

And the way it works though is that you're given what I'll call a puck when you sit down. One side of it ... it's kind of like a coaster for your cup. But one side of it is green and the other side is red. And if you place the puck on the table with the green side facing up, they'll see that okay, you're open to more food, so they'll continuously bring food out to you and your

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table. If you flip it over to red, then they know that means, "Okay, I've had enough for now. Let's take a break or let's just stop altogether." So, that's kind of the way it works. So, it's one of those all you can eat places, right? You eat until you're full, until you're stuffed. And when we plan to go there, I will tell you that I usually won't eat for most of the day, and that is because I want to be able to eat as much as I can when I get there. It's not cheap to eat there and I want to get my money's worth, right?

So, I know that I'll be able to eat more if I starve myself based on ... I use that in air quotes, the word starve, based on my previous comments about actual hunger because I've never actually been starving. So, I'll go throughout the day, won't eat much at all, all in anticipation of eating as much as I can and getting my money's worth when I get to the restaurant. And we're strategic about this, right? I mean, we're careful. When we're there, I'm careful not to fill up on the added things like salads and sides or drinks or anything like that. I mean, I am dialed in to getting my money's worth. And that's the thought that ... it's the thought that I want to eat as much of the expensive stuff as I can at that set price.

So, maybe you've had the same strategy if you've been to a Brazilian steakhouse or any place like that, any kind of buffet. But here's the question. So, if your car is running low on fuel, do you try to overfill it when you gas up? Probably not, right? So, we have to ask, will we actually be able to eat more if our stomach is somewhat empty? The answer to that is obviously yes and no. Of course, if you eat just before you go to a big dinner, then you won't be able to eat as much at dinner. But just because you starve yourself all day long, just because I go all day long without eating a lot, that doesn't mean that I'll be able to eat any more than my stomach can hold, even though the stomach can expand to a certain extent.

So, the point is, when we think we're hungry, when we get those signs of stomach growls or hunger pangs, you may want to eat more, you may try to eat more. But you're still limited on what you can eat. You could try to eat more, but you simply can't. And you shouldn't try to. The body is smart. And you can try to trick it by starving yourself or by trying to eat more when you feel hungry, but there is no tricking physics. What will fit in your stomach is what will fit, nothing more, right? Now, that's hunger in a nutshell.

Cravings, on the other hand, are different. And I bring this up because many times we confuse cravings with hunger. With hunger, we try to fill up. With cravings, we try to satisfy. And while hunger and cravings are both physiological in nature, hunger is also physical, but cravings are mental. That's an important point. Hunger pangs are an actual contraction of the stomach muscles. It's caused by emptiness of the stomach or maybe because you're used to eating at a certain time of day. But cravings are a response to memory and a sense of pleasure. That comes from the brain. All right?

Cravings are usually for a specific food or type of food. And believe it or not, cravings actually pass with time. But hunger doesn't pass with time, it persists. And it's not usually for a specific food. If you're really hungry, then you'll eat just about anything. I get my girls on this all the time, you know? My daughters will say they're hungry, and I'll ask them, "Okay, you're hungry? You want some broccoli?" And of course they say no, right? And that means that they're not really hungry. I know, that's a bad dad, right? Okay, I'll take that hit. What kid wants to eat broccoli at age three or age six? But we do the same thing as adults. And that's the difference, though, between hunger and cravings. Hunger is physical, cravings are mental.

So, how do we handle cravings? And what cravings exactly are we talking about? So, I'm going to go right to the point here, and if you were to type in the words 'stop craving' in the search box in Google, the number one auto fill that will complete that phrase is sugar. So, if you type

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'stop craving,' 'stop craving sugar' will pop up as the top search. That means it's the most searched term in the stop craving category. So, recently one of the things that I wanted to focus on at the turn of the new year was focusing on how much sugar I was getting in daily. I felt like I had gone a little overboard from around Thanksgiving all the way through the new year. So, I kind of wanted to get a handle on that. That's something that I wanted to focus on. And I know from previous experience that the more sugar you eat ... previous experience and previous research, I should say. The more sugar you eat, the more you want, and the converse is also true. The less sugar you eat, the less you want, okay? And there's a reason for that.

The truth is, though, that it's hard to kick bad habits if you don't have the right approach. I mean, that's the whole premise behind my fit life program, having a plan and an approach to implement healthy habits for life. But when it comes to sugar cravings, some would even say they have a sugar addiction, the sugar habit can be one of the hardest to break. And recent data has shown that sugar affects the brain in many ways like an addictive drug. You can even get withdrawal symptoms from going cold turkey on sugar.

So, as I researched all this, I basically came ... after gathering the data, I sorted it into what I would call four bins. There are some reasons for those cravings, for the sugar cravings in particular. And they can be binned into four different categories. Those four categories are your blood sugar levels, low blood sugar levels for example, that's what will make you crave sugar. Improper nutrients in your diet or inadequate nutrients in your diet. Stress and a lack of sleep, and I lump those two together. I'll talk about that in a little bit. And number four, just the simple habit of eating a lot of sugar. So, I'll briefly hit each one of these and talk a little bit about what you can do with each one of them.

So, when it comes to blood sugar levels, it's important to give a little background here. So, sugar provides energy and fuel. And it provides that to both the brain and muscles in your body. So, sugar is a simple carb and it's processed rather quickly and used for energy and fuel, which makes it really a preferred choice for human metabolism. The problem is that if you leave that unchecked, sugar can cause spikes in your blood ... sugar spikes in your bloodstream, and those spikes then come back down and cause extreme lows in the bloodstream. And that's due to the metabolic response. It has to do with insulin, the pancreas. I talk a lot about this in episode number 29, which was the Set, Point, Weight, Metabolism and Hormones episode, so you can check that out at tdfitness.net/029. And I'll link to that in the show notes as well. But when your sugar intake isn't controlled, it causes you to want more sugar. So, that's kind of the gist of the blood sugar levels.

Now, when it comes to proper nutrients in your diet, many natural sources of sugar ... in fact, an argument that you may have heard is that, "Well, there's sugar in a lot of natural things, primarily fruit. So, you're saying sugar's bad for me?" Well, the difference is that sugar ... I don't see any fruit juices growing on trees, right? Fruit grows on trees and fruit has built in fiber. And the point is that fiber when taken with sugar kind of quells that spike in blood sugar. So, if you have sugar with something that is fibrous or with a protein or even with a fat, that helps to slow the release of sugar in the bloodstream, and that's what you want. You don't want those big up and down spikes. You want more of a level playing field, if you will, when it comes to your intake and your metabolism.

So, table sugar, cake, soft drinks, they don't have any fiber or protein to go along with the sugar. Neither do simple carbs like potato chips or white rice, white pasta, white breads. All of those, the body sees and breaks down as simple sugars. You may not inherently think about bread and pasta as sugar, but that's essentially how the body metabolizes those foods. But that's why fiber and other categories of food such as proteins and fats are important. Otherwise, the sugar just has an express lane to go right to the bloodstream, does not pass

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go. It goes right there and causes spikes in insulin and blood sugar. So, that's a quite background.

So, what do you do? Well, when you eat sweets, try to consume some protein, try to consume some healthy fats or some fiber with those sweets. Another note here, typically you want to avoid artificial sweeteners too. I've written about this on the blog. One post was called Three Facts About Zero Calorie Soda. Again, I'll link to that in the show notes. But why do you want to avoid artificial sweeteners? Well, there's a lot of conflicting research out there on this topic. But the gist is that artificial sweeteners can actually have the opposite effect of what you're trying to achieve. So, people will lose artificial sweeteners because they don't have the calories associated with sugar itself. But instead of satisfying that sugar craving that your body is looking for, it can actually leave you wanting more sugar because the artificial sweeteners don't trigger the fact that you're being satiated or you're actually meeting that sugar need when you consume artificial sweeteners. It may taste like it initially, but your body doesn't metabolize it and break it down that way. So, it doesn't recognize that it's getting the sugar that it craves, so it could lead to a never-ending cycle where you want even more sugar. So, that's the reason.

Now, the third category was stress and a lack of sleep. And why do I lump these together? Well, stress can lead to a lack of sleep, and lack of sleep makes you more susceptible to increased stress. So, that's a vicious circle and it's a downward spiral. When it comes to hormones, stress and lack of sleep, all of that is intertwined. So, I said that cravings are mental, right? But it's important to understand how hormones effect our brains and our mental function. Increased stress, which can be made worse by a lack of sleep, causes hormonal reactions that make you susceptible to things like weight gain, grumpiness, negative moods, and you guessed it, cravings.

So, you can see how all of this is interrelated. That's why we try to affect what we can here by reducing stressors in our lives and by ensuring we get adequate rest. You can't really directly affect your mood. You can't decide to be happy if you're in a really negative mood, same thing with grumpiness. And you can't affect weight gain directly either, right? But you can affect the amount of rest that you get and you have some control over the amount of stressors that are coming into your world, into your life. So, there's a lot of ... there's a lot that I've written and blogged about and recorded on stress. If you go to tdfitness.net and just type stress in the search box there, you'll see a number of posts and podcasts on that topic.

So, the fourth category for cravings is the habit category. And what I want to do here is give you five or six things that you can do to help in the habit arena, because that's what I talk about, right? Is habits, instilling healthy habits, helping to reduce some of those more negative habits. So, here you go. These are some things that you can do to change your habits. The first thing is try not to let yourself get to the point of hunger, if you will, or to the point where you feel like you have to eat right now. If you get there, then your body has such a strong influence over your actions. Your body is essentially in control. I've been there before where you wait so long to eat and you're like, "Okay, I just want the closest thing around. It doesn't matter how healthy or how unhealthy it is. I just want to eat something and I want to be satisfied right now." We've all been there.

But try not to let yourself get there on a regular basis. Sometimes it's just going to happen, I get it. But if you can plan your eating times as much as possible, even the types of food that you will eat to keep hunger at bay, then that will serve you well in the long run. That planning aspect is one of the things that we talk about in the fit life program because it is so important. Sometimes it just takes us stepping back and then looking forward over what we are expecting to get out of our day, where we expect to be, the types of access that we'll

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have to maybe healthy options, when we'll be tempted with less healthy options. These are all things that for the most part, we have an idea of what's coming, right? We have an idea of what's coming on most days. So, if you can plan around that, then that will serve you well.

The second thing you want to do to instill the healthy habits and to keep those sugar cravings at bay is to recognize what your body is telling you. So, are you really hungry? Sometimes it seems like we're hungry, but it's really just a craving. We led off with this, right? If you've eaten recently, maybe you're not actually hungry, you're just craving something in particular, something sweet. So, what you can do is give it a little while, just let it pass because cravings will pass with time, and it doesn't take that long. You can get up and go for a walk, walk around, go get your mind off of the craving. Just go and do something else or try something healthier that will satisfy your feeling.

The next thing you can do, and this is on a broader scale, is try to get an idea of when you get these cravings. Is it associated with an event, for example, or an action, or some kind of activity during the day? Do you get a sweet drink after lunch every day? If so, that may just be a habit. Do you find yourself craving when you feel a certain way? Sometimes stress or being tired or being bored, any of these can lead to cravings and mindless eating. Maybe you come home, you sit down on the couch and watch one of your favorite TV shows, and that is the trigger that is associated with, "I'd like something sweet right now, maybe I'll have a soda." Those are the things that over time, those habits like that become so instilled and ingrained in what we do in our daily lives that we overlook the fact that those are just habits and they can be changed. So, again, when you step back and focus on ... look around and survey what you're doing and why, again, that can help you recognize and identify some of those triggers to some of those cravings for sugar.

Next, I'll tell you that moderation is the key. Don't try to quit cold turkey. So, you do want to live a little, right? I mean, we all do. But do it smartly, okay? If you try to go cold turkey, then your chances of maintaining that over the long term are much, much lower, okay? You want to try to make the change moderately over time. Also, think about quality over quantity. I've talked about one example of this before in the podcast. So, I love chocolate. I really like chocolate in particular, any combination of chocolate and peanut butter, hey, I'm sold, right? That's my jam, okay? So, it's probably no surprise that one of my favorite types of candy is Reece's Peanut Butter Cups because I think that's the perfect blend of chocolate and peanut butter. Yeah, there's a lot of sugar in Reece's Peanut Butter Cups, I get it.

So, what do I do instead of eating a pack of Reece's Peanut Butter Cups every day? Well, what I've done is, I take peanut butter to work, but I take the individual packets, the small ones, so it's a serving of peanut butter. And I actually bought some good quality dark chocolate, and I'll take about a one inch by one inch square of dark chocolate and eat that with the peanut butter. And it's really good. Now that's probably one of my favorite things, maybe even above Reece's Peanut Butter Cups. But it's a lot healthier. The quality of the chocolate is a lot better, first of all, and I can control the amount of sugar, okay? There are positive things with quality dark chocolate when you think about the antioxidants and so forth. Yes, there's still sugar in there, but there's not as much sugar as there would be in a candy bar, for example.

So, another thing you can do to help with the cravings and kick the habit, if you will, is to track how much you're taking in. How much sugar should you consume, right? So you track this, but you may not even know how much you should be taking in. Well, according to the American Heart Association, they say that women should consume no more than six teaspoons of sugar a day, which is about 100 calories, and men should take in a maximum of nine teaspoons a day, and that's about 150 calories. I'll be honest, that doesn't help me that much

because I'm not really eating teaspoons of sugar out of the sugar bowl. But what I'll tell you is this, this is how I track it.

A more specific approach, a more practical approach if you will, is to look at what the latest publishing of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans states, and that is that your added sugar intake should make up no more than about 10% of your total calories. So, I started tracking my sugar intake this year, again, as part of my healthier living new year resolution, probably like most people, right? And I just guesstimated with an average dietary intake of 2,500 calories a day, that's ... like I said, that's average. I usually consume more when I'm training. But I'll say 10% of 2,500 calories is 250 calories, right? So, knowing that sugars are a carb, a carbohydrate, and knowing that all carbohydrates have four calories per gram ... you may not know that, but I'm telling you that right now. All carbs, four calories per gram, period. If I divide 250 calories by four, I'll get the number of grams of sugar I should have per day to keep myself under the 10%. And that comes out to be about 62 grams of sugar per day. Why did I pick grams? Well, because if you look at any nutrition label, that's how you'll see the sugar is presented on the label. So, it makes sense for me and it's easy for me to count.

If you were to consume 2,000 calories per day ... okay, public math here. Probably shouldn't be doing this, but 2,000 calories per day, 10% of that you want to keep your sugars below that, so you want to keep it below 200 calories. Well, if you divide that by four, then you get 50 grams of sugar per day, okay? So that's kind of how that works. After a few days, I'll tell you, you don't even have to look at the labels for some of your favorite foods or some of your favorite sources of sugar because you'll know how much sugar is in some of those go-to items. For me, it's something like a chai tea latte or a piece of chocolate. I know right off the bat how much sugar that is. And I know that if I have two servings of that, if I have a sugary drink, for example, and a piece of cake, for example, then I'm at my max sugar content for the day. And I try to stay below that. Okay?

So, the final thing when it comes to habits is just to make it a priority. Our attention goes where we focus our efforts. So, if you dial into your cravings, then that alone will serve you well because you'll be more thoughtful, more cognizant and more aware of your cravings and when they occur and why. I will tell you that that is such a huge step making it a priority because when you make something a priority, you are intentionally saying, "I'm going to focus on this and I'm not going to focus on this other area right now." And sometimes we need to do that. If you're going overboard with sugar, then that is something that you need to address, even if it means that you're not able to get your seven workouts in a week, okay? It's not as important to get seven workouts in if you're going way overboard on sugar because that is directly affecting your health. You could probably get by with three or four workouts per week. Again, just using an example of trying to dial in to a priority for a certain amount of time.

So, that's the way I do it. That's the way I instruct and teach people to do it. And it's very effective, okay? With that, I will leave you. I'll ask though that if you found this episode helpful, then I'd appreciate a like or a comment or both if you're watching on YouTube or Facebook. And if you're listening via iTunes or Google Play, go ahead and rate this episode or rate the TD Fitness Podcast and leave a comment. You can get links to all of the things that I referenced here in the show notes page for this episode at tdfitness.net/064. Thanks for watching, thanks for listening. Have a blessed one. Coach T. out.

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