

# SARAH'S BRAIN FOOD BITES

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## BALANCING BLOOD SUGAR TO MANAGE CRAVINGS

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### **Blood sugar and cravings.**

People usually think about blood sugar in relation to diabetes. However, peaks and troughs of blood sugar levels are responsible for daily symptoms related to our energy, mood, weight and cravings. Our blood sugar can surge and fall many times throughout the day and when it drops we might feel irritable, lacking in energy and in need of a quick fix. Alcohol has a big effect on blood sugar levels; sugar and alcohol combined is even more problematic.

When a glass of wine or a bar of chocolate provides a pick-me-up at the end of the day, that could be you trying to boost your blood sugar levels. Craving an alcoholic drink can be a strong sign of blood sugar imbalance. Drinking alcohol makes those peaks and troughs in blood sugar more pronounced and the symptoms stronger. The good news is that using diet you can take steps to balance your blood sugar and lessen any cravings for alcohol.

Signs of blood sugar imbalances include:

- Sweet cravings
- Uncontrolled eating or drinking
- Waking up after a few hours sleep/unable to get back to sleep for a while
- Needing coffee or craving sugar mid-afternoon
- Feeling shaky or irritable before meals or if a meal is missed.
- Headaches if meals are delayed
- Low energy or poor concentration mid-afternoon

Every time we eat our body converts food to energy and it enters the bloodstream. The trick is to get the food to enter slowly, giving sustained energy, concentration and mood. If you eat or drink something that gives you a quick hit, your blood sugar increases quickly but drops soon

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after. This crash can cause symptoms like lack of focus, energy lows, mood swings and anxiety. You then crave another hit to get your blood sugar to rise again. This feeds into a cycle of poor food choices and ongoing niggling issues with energy and well-being.

Foods that increase blood sugar quickly are foods with sugar in them, starchy foods (bread, pasta, rice, pastries, etc), caffeine, soft drinks and alcohol. You may want to avoid or limit these foods.

Foods that release energy into the blood stream slowly are protein-rich, fibre-dense with a good dose of healthy fats. These include fish, pulses, beans, meat, poultry, vegetables, olive oil, nuts and seeds.

The proportions of these nutrients on your plate is important. A small amount of chicken in a massive bowl of pasta won't help balance blood sugar. However, a large chicken breast with generous amounts of vegetables with a small amount of wholemeal noodles will.

Think of your plate as divided into quarters, half of the plate is dedicated to vegetables - of all shapes, sizes and colours. Just over a quarter is your source of protein. The remaining part of your plate (just under a quarter) is left for starchy carbohydrate if you would like it (rice, pasta, potato, starchy veg like sweet potato, bread). Even better if this portion of carbohydrate is whole grain or wholemeal.

The exception to this is if your carbohydrate source comes from lentils, beans or pulses; because these contain a generous amount of starchy carbs they effectively cover both the carbohydrate and protein portion of your meal.

Don't forget that a generous drizzle of olive oil, mayonnaise or butter helps too. The fats in the meal help you feel more satisfied, helping to manage cravings for starchy or sugar foods and alcohol. You can also add fats by adding nuts, seeds or avocado to your meals.