Have you ever found yourself craving certain foods during times of stress or when you are dieting? We are beginning to learn more about the reasons why intelligent, well-meaning people find themselves consuming foods they hadn’t planned on eating. Here are a few of the neurotransmitters, or brain chemicals, that come into play:

**Serotonin** – This neurotransmitter boosts mood, curbs food cravings, increases tolerance to pain, and helps with sleep. If you have low levels of serotonin, you may experience insomnia, depression, and cravings for carbohydrates.

The foods you eat can affect your serotonin levels: sweets, pasta and breads may increase serotonin levels, but may cause highs and lows in blood sugar. Whole grains such as brown rice lead to a gradual increase in serotonin without the negative effect on blood sugar. Some research shows that Omega-3 fatty acids in fish oil may raise serotonin levels.

**Neuropeptide Y (NPY)** – Feeling stressed? Following a restrictive diet? Have a tendency to skip meals? Stress and dieting cause the adrenal glands to release the stress hormone corticosterone, which in turn leads the hypothalamus to release NPY. NPY turns on your desire for sweets and other carbohydrate-rich foods, leading to some of the food cravings experienced by dieters and people who are under chronic stress. NPY levels tend to be highest in the morning.

**Galanin** – This is a nerve chemical from the hypothalamus which increases your desire to eat fatty foods. Galanin may be released in response to stress hormones or during dieting when body fat is breaking down or when several hours have passed between meals. In addition to increasing cravings for fat, galanin can affect how much of the fat eaten is stored as body fat. Galanin levels begin to rise by early afternoon, and peak in the evening, so they may influence the food choices of those who eat the majority of their calories late in the day.

How can you work around these brain chemicals so that they don’t sabotage your healthy eating efforts? It’s best to avoid crash dieting and skipping meals. Eat 3 to 5 small meals and snacks spaced throughout the day. Make sure each meal includes good sources of nutrients: small amounts of lean protein and whole grains, lots of fruits and vegetables (5-10 servings per day), and a variety of nuts and legumes. Unprocessed foods are best if you are trying to limit sugars, sodium, and processed fats. Look for non-food related ways to manage stress, such as yoga, exercise, talking to a friend or writing in a journal.

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**FOOD and MOOD**

**LEARN MORE**

about managing your weight and how your diet can help you heal.

Call Elliot Nutrition Services at 663-2521.

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**Barbara’s High Fiber Bars**

From the kitchen of...

Elliot Nutrition Services

2 cups skim milk
2 eggs
16 oz natural peanut butter
2-1/2 cups oatmeal
2-1/2 cups oat bran (Or substitute 1/2 cup ground flax for 1/2 cup of the oat bran if desired)
1/2 cup chopped walnuts
1 package chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

- Mix together the skim milk, eggs and peanut butter. In a separate bowl, mix together the oatmeal and oat bran. Mix both the wet and dry ingredients. Finally, add the walnuts and chocolate chips.
- Spread in greased 9x11 pan and bake for 30 minutes.
- Enjoy!