

## Are you a 'boredom eater'? How to stop the lockdown snack attacks

With snacking up by 53 per cent, we look at the psychology behind it and why it's different to comfort eating

By Lauren Libbert

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My boredom snack of choice is Jaffa Cakes. A twin pack of 20 is £1 at my supermarket, so I'll usually chuck a couple into the weekly shop and eat four or five on the trot at boredom o'clock, which strikes every lockdown evening without fail at 8.20pm when dinner's been cleared and I'm sitting on the sofa, yet again, with the TV remote in hand.

I've flirted with sea salt crisps and chocolate fingers but there's nothing so satisfying and uplifting as the sensation of teeth sinking into chocolate then zesty orange then sponge. It's my pleasure-triggering slap on the back, praise for reaching the end of another bleak, boring day of homeschool and work with nothing else to do.

And it seems I'm not the only one flinging open my kitchen cupboards to fill the empty hours. According to users of the Zoe Covid symptom study app, 34 per cent snacked more in the first lockdown, and that has risen to 53 per cent this time.

It's something experts are attributing to the effect of months of restrictions, with the comfort eating of those strange early days replaced by something closer to monotony.

“Comfort snacking is using food to self-soothe when we feel anxious or overwhelmed,” says the psychologist [Dr Christy Fergusson](#).

“We did this in the first lockdown when we were experiencing all the panic around Covid for the first time. But the boredom snacking of this lockdown is more of a mindless activity we do when we’re fed up and want something to do.”

Alex White, nutrition scientist at the British Nutrition Foundation, agrees that tedium is playing a big part in our growing snack habit.

“This unprecedented time has led to a number of additional challenges, including stress and boredom, with spending so much more time at home,” says White. “Research suggests we’re likely to eat more and make more unhealthy choices when bored, and graze on healthier snacks.”

Naturally, all this boredom eating is doing nothing for our escalating obesity crisis, especially now it’s winter when we tend to eat more and move less anyway.

The NHS recommends 150 minutes of exercise a week for 19 to 64 year-olds but four in 10 say they’re exercising less than during the first lockdown. And neither Boris Johnson’s gallant persistence with running nor Rishi Sunak’s love affair with his Peloton bike has had any effect on boosting the nation’s fitness morale.

In fact, a recent survey for the Social Market Foundation found that 28 per cent of people who describe themselves as living with obesity said they were taking steps to lose weight because of the pandemic, while nearly a third said their diet had deteriorated, and 31 per cent said Covid meant they were doing less exercise.

According to Dr Fergusson, working from home is a huge part of the boredom-eating problem. “Pre-pandemic, we’d often adopt good habits during the week and then at weekends they’d fall by the wayside a bit,” she says. “But now we’re at home, and that structure has gone. The darker nights and wetter weather of Lockdown 3 has made it much harder, as there are fewer pleasurable activities to do. So we feel bored and turn to food to mindlessly distract us.”

Let’s face it, very few of us are reaching for a kale smoothie when we’re going mad with tedium. The snacks we crave are quick fix; high sugar, high carb, high salt and bad for you. “Especially now we’re in winter, with little sunlight, our levels of serotonin – the happy hormone – have dropped and these types of foods give us an immediate boost of blood sugar, which makes us feel momentarily happy. But then our sugar levels crash soon after. It’s a vicious cycle,” says Dr Fergusson.

The best way to keep boredom grazing in check is to recognise that emotional eating has its place, especially in these tough times. “Food has this wonderful physiological impact and gives us this momentary release,” she says. “That’s why we turn to it when there’s nothing else to distract us. And it’s OK to have this emotional attachment and pleasure component to food.”

But to safeguard our health, it’s essential we give our bodies healthy building blocks. Human beings are creatures of habit in normal times but the pandemic life of walk, eat, shop, work, repeat has carved our

schedules into stone, where bad habits can fester and thrive.

“To set up your body for success and prevent boredom eating, eat every three to four hours and load up on protein at every meal, such as eggs, fish and meat, to make you fuller and keep your blood sugar steady, so you’re less hungry when you’re bored,” says Dr Fergusson.

“Ask yourself, ‘what are the most problematic times of the day?’ Often there’s an afternoon dip. Or it will be in the evening when you’re watching TV. Look out for your routine pitfalls then change things, so you’re making an effort to snack less or differently at those times.”

Plating up your snacks is a good place to start. “Put a handful of crisps in a bowl rather than taking the whole bag, so you know when to stop,” Dr Fergusson says. “And upgrade your snacks, so instead of the highly processed sugary chocolate bars, buy dark chocolate which is rich and will give you that fix after a couple of chunks, or dairy-free health bars, Medjool dates, olives or nut butter spreads on crackers. They won’t trigger that sugar-crash-sugar cycle.”

Suzie Sawyer, a clinical nutritionist at [Alive!](#), suggests stocking up on brazil nuts, oats, turkey slices and bananas, all of which contain tryptophan, which stimulates serotonin production. “Leave all the healthy snacks out on the side or at the front of the fridge so they’re there, right in your eye line when boredom strikes,” she adds.

Adopting a more mindful way of eating can also reduce your instinct to open the fridge when bored. “When you’re eating your main meals, try to enjoy each mouthful of food, putting your knife and fork down while you’re chewing,” suggests Sawyer.

“This will make you feel fuller and less likely to want to snack.” She also recommends making your own muesli bars, using xylitol instead of sugar, as “anything homemade will usually be healthier”.

It’s also important to think about what you’re buying, focusing on high protein foods and limiting the variety of snacks you buy.

“If you feel you need treats, try just having one type in the house at any one time,” says White. “And if you’re only eating out of boredom, try doing something else at that time like going for a walk or doing some exercise.”

That’s that, then. At 8.20 tonight I’ll be in the bath or taking the dog for a walk. No snacks in sight.

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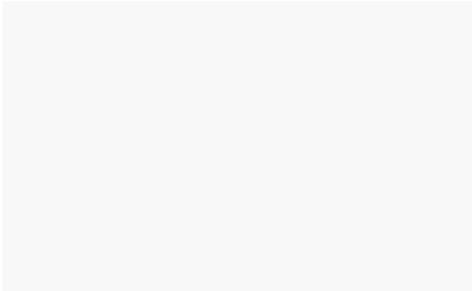
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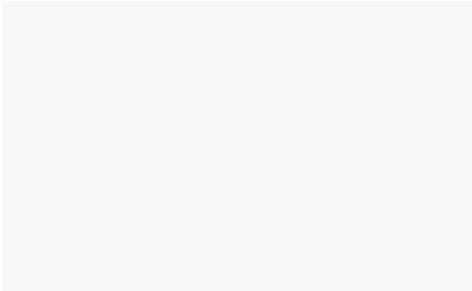
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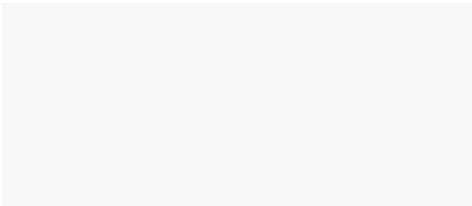
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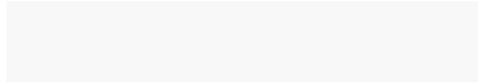


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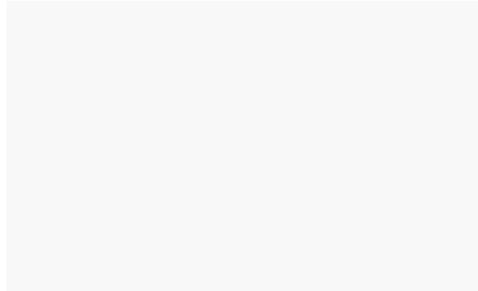




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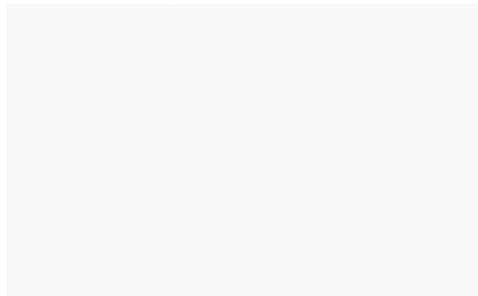
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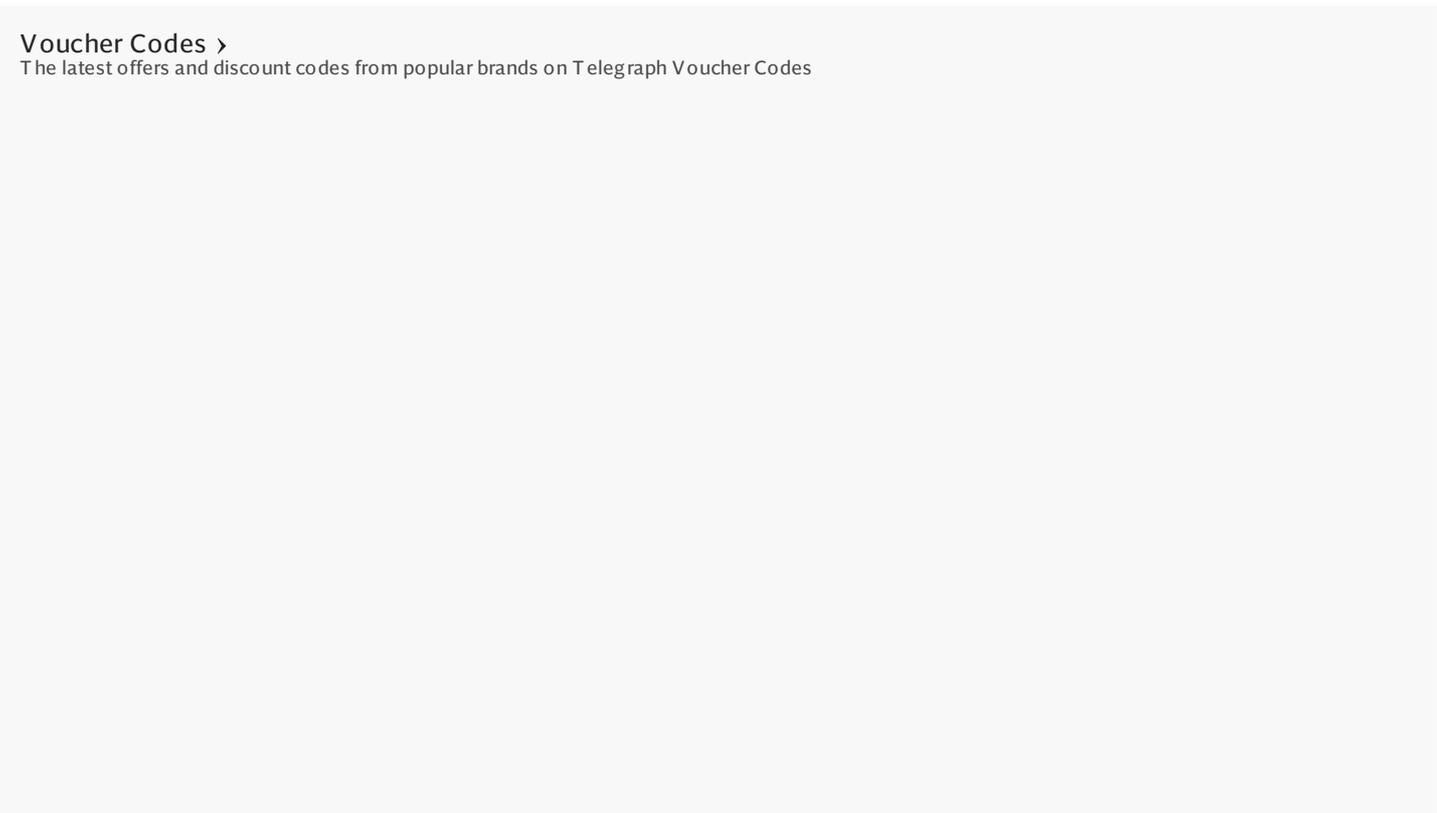
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