

Ask the experts

Q Is crying good for you? Women shed tears more easily than men, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Emotional waterworks can be beneficial. Here's a psychologist's perspective on the upside of sobbing.



Why we cry Humans most likely cry to solicit help and comfort, and sometimes to ward off aggression from others (female tears can stop men from being mean). It has these functions in helpless, dependent babies, and we have little reason to assume that this trait changes as people get older.

Why it feels good It's possible that there is some physiological benefit to crying, such as stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system, which is important for relaxation. Shedding tears may also release opioids, natural chemicals that affect our feelings of pleasure, and oxytocin, a hormone linked to bonding, feelings of trust and stress reduction. The largest benefit, however, comes not from crying

itself but from the comfort and support others offer in reaction to our tears. All of that said, occasionally controlling your tears isn't likely to harm your health. But continually suppressing emotions can sap your body of energy and potentially cause physical symptoms.

Why women cry more First, the male sex hormone testosterone seems to inhibit crying, while the female hormone prolactin may lower the emotional threshold. Plus, women may be exposed to more emotionally charged situations, such as caregiving, and tend to be more empathetic. Finally, men are often expected to control their tears.

Tears of joy—a myth? Some experts doubt whether we ever cry for positive reasons. Very often, during a

happy moment we allow ourselves to reflect on less joyful times. For example, during a reunion, we may actually cry for all the time that we missed each other. And while getting married is often a positive event, at the same time it is the end of a certain phase in life and this could cause tears of sadness. Another theory is that very positive emotions may also evoke a kind of helplessness. You are simply at a loss as to how to express your extreme joy. This inability to adequately convey your feelings might result in tears.

— *Ad Vingerhoets, Ph.D., clinical professor of clinical psychology at Tilburg University in The Netherlands and editor of Emotion Regulation and Well-Being (Springer)* »

Can't resist sweet treats in the evening? Eat an apple instead.



MARTHA RICH

Q Why do I get sweet cravings at night, and can I reduce them? **Not eating enough during the day can cause nighttime noshing. Research shows that eating a high-protein breakfast, such as eggs,** leads to increased feelings of fullness all day. Other great protein sources include turkey, low-fat cottage cheese, soybeans or a handful of nuts.

Quiz yourself Before taking a bite, ask yourself if you're hungry. If the answer is "no," get out of the kitchen immediately! Take a bath, call a friend, play with your dog, paint your nails, knit, read or do something else you enjoy.

Replace your sweets Don't keep pastries or cookies on hand. Instead, buy healthier snack options for when you *are* truly hungry and want something sweet. Try fresh apples or pears, low-fat popcorn sprinkled with cinnamon or Greek yogurt with honey.

—Karen Raden, M.S., R.D., integrative dietitian in Chicago

Q Is there a natural way to get rid of varicose veins? **One of the most important things you can do is eat more fiber. We eat only one-tenth of the amount we evolved on as a species,** and this deficiency results in excessive blood pressure in the veins. Recommended fiber sources include whole wheat, oats, beans, vegetables and fruits; berries in particular are rich in flavonoids that have been shown to strengthen veins.

Supplement solution Horse chestnut seed extract contains a compound that is believed to strengthen blood-vessel walls. A review of several studies in 2006 found it effective in relieving the pain, itchiness and swelling associated with varicose veins; the recommended dosage is 500 milligrams three times a day.

—Joseph Pizzorno Jr., N.D., founding president of Bastyr University of Naturopathic Medicine in Seattle ✕