

HOW TO STOP HATING YOUR LEAST FAVORITE FOOD

By Amanda Mull

"I can't stand cucumbers, but I'm ready to change if I can."

Cucumbers are my nemesis. I want to fight every food in the melon family and many melon-adjacent foods, but melons avoid my primary disdain because they usually take their rightful place as easily avoidable fruit-salad filler. Cucumbers, though. *Cucumbers*. They hide in all kinds of things that otherwise seem safe to put in my mouth: sushi rolls, salads, sandwiches, the takeout "lunch bowls" that restaurants near my office sell for \$14.

As far as I can remember, I've never liked cucumbers, mostly because they taste bad. If they're present, they're the first thing I notice, and it's like someone has sprayed a middle schooler's eau de toilette from 2002 on my food. Most other people appear to live on slightly different planes of cucumber reality from mine, which I've learned over several decades of watching
10 people somehow eat them voluntarily.

My cuke avoidance is what's known as a food aversion, and although aversions are widespread in the United States, hating a food that others love is socially coded as fussy or unsophisticated. People with many or severe aversions often experience isolating anxiety or social opprobrium. For people like me, it's more commonly just a nuisance that might inspire an occasional eye roll.

Still, my distaste for such an innocuous food feels vaguely shameful, and after much deliberation, I'm ready to switch sides. I'm ready to *make* myself like cucumbers. Getting there is unlikely to make any huge improvement in my life, but at the very least, I'd like to reroute my energy to a more interesting source of shame. And the good news, according to researchers, is that most people can reset their neural pathways to one day enjoy—or at least tolerate—a nice
20 gazpacho.

Before you can solve a problem, you have to understand what it is: Why is it cucumbers for me, and broccoli or oysters for some other people? There's no neat explanation, according to Paul Rozin, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "The great majority of people have a fair number of things they don't like," he says. There is [evidence of genetic differences](#)¹ that make some people more sensitive to certain chemicals in food, but those people might actually prefer the taste of those chemicals. "Sensitivity doesn't necessarily mean a person will be averse to something," Rozin explains.

10 There is one type of aversion that scientists understand pretty well, though, according to Anthony Sclafani, a professor at Brooklyn College who studies the neurobiology of taste: If you eat a novel food and then experience nausea or vomiting, your brain is primed to blame that food. That's true even if you know, on an intellectual level, that the food isn't at fault. "We get sick to our stomach and automatically develop an aversion. It's just hardwired," Sclafani says. Because of this, people with cancer are often advised to "scapegoat" particular foods during chemotherapy: To avoid creating an association between the treatment's nauseous side effects and a patient's normal diet over time, the brain can be steered toward assigning those effects to novel foods instead.

10 I've never had a traumatic barf experience with cucumbers, so my aversion is probably just an innate dislike. And the culprit behind my long-term cuke hatred might be in the vegetable's smell, more specifically than its taste. "What we call 'taste' is really 'flavor,' which is a mixture of taste, smell, and texture," Sclafani says. People lose olfactory sensitivity as they age, which is a big reason that many people seem to outgrow childhood aversions: A food that might have been overwhelming to a kid will read as more mellow to an adult. I'm in my 30s, so there's a decent chance that, were I to give cucumbers a fair shake, I'd hate them a lot less than my childhood memories have led me to believe.

Childhood can be key to later-in-life food preferences in a lot of ways. Before a baby is even born, what a mother eats can influence what her infant will like because diet affects amniotic

¹ Link: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2012/09/14/161057954/love-to-hate-cilantro-its-in-your-genes-and-maybe-in-your-head>

fluid, and that influence continues in the months after birth through lactation. “If an Italian mother eats a lot of garlic, the milk has a garlic flavor to it,” says Sclafani. “Her infant will be more accepting of garlic than the infant of a mother who doesn’t eat garlic.” For mothers who don’t breastfeed, varying an infant’s formula flavor can help prevent later pickiness.

The tie between early life and food preference goes beyond issues of exposure, says Ellyn Satter, a dietitian and therapist who studies and treats picky eating in both children and adults. In childhood, people acquire many of their emotional difficulties with eating, so understanding that emotional tie is key to both overcoming aversions and raising children with positive relationships to food. “In our culture, it’s all about what you ‘should’ be eating, not about how
10 you feel about it or your enjoyment of food,” says Satter. “Children are coerced to eat certain amounts of certain types of food, which turns them off to those foods.”

Instead, she says, parents should be patient with their kids and let them come to new foods naturally. “Picky kids will desensitize themselves, and they do that by seeing [a food] on the table and watching their parents eating and enjoying.”

With adults, the process is pretty similar, according to all the experts I spoke to. Food aversions can generally be overcome with [gentle, steady exposure](#)², which can start with something as simple as buying the offending food and allowing it to be in the house. Satter says that adults should also feel free to do something kids do instinctually: Put a food in their mouth and then take it out, without forcing themselves to swallow. That allows a person to grow accustomed to
20 a taste or texture without necessarily associating it with a negative physical reaction, since swallowing something you don’t enjoy can be difficult and unpleasant.

I should probably just go buy a cucumber instead of bothering experts and writing a thousand words about it. I even have some spicy hummus in my fridge, and from what I’ve gleaned based on how other people eat cucumbers, they might pair well together. A journey of a thousand Israeli salads begins with a single step.

² Link: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20541572/>

That said, people with food aversions like mine often feel worse about them than is necessary, and even extremely picky eaters are unlikely to be doing themselves any physical harm. “Often there’s nutritional concern where there shouldn’t be,” says Rozin. “The only time they get in trouble is if they’re in someone’s house, where it’s considered sort of rude just not to like things.”

Satter agrees that I might be better off if I just forgave myself for disliking certain things instead of trying to push through them. “If people can unhook themselves from the ‘shoulds’ and instead think about eating foods they enjoy, our research has shown that in the long run, they’re healthier,” she says.