

# **MIDNIGHT MUNCHING**

## **How to Overcome "Werewolf Syndrome"**

by William H. Polonsky, Ph.D., C.D.E.

*From Diabetes Self-Management Magazine November/December 1997*

It always happens at night. After a good day of eating balanced meals, exercising, and testing, a low grumble awakens deep down inside. The kitchen beckons, tempting you with its treasures, and soon you find yourself transported there, seemingly against your will.

Like the legendary werewolf, who sprouts hair, claws, and an uncontrollable urge to feast when the moon rises, people with werewolf syndrome lose control when the sun goes down. Their eyes grow large and their thoughts turn to food, food, and more food! Soon, they are on the prowl, and God help any goodies in their path.

Simply put, werewolf syndrome is a common form of problematic nighttime eating. It can lead to frustrating, uncontrollable behavior and anxious, guilty feelings. And if you have diabetes, in which case you have probably been encouraged to watch your weight and manage your eating carefully, you can see how werewolf eating can lead to a breakdown in diabetes control. Is all this beginning to sound a little familiar to you?

Let's meet Dana, a 43-year-old married woman with two young children and a successful career in advertising. She has been living with diabetes for the past two years and has worked hard to follow her health-care team's recommendations, but she is very frustrated with herself. Although she exercises regularly, tests her blood sugar level several times a day, and eats three small, nutritious meals each day, her blood sugar levels remains elevated. For example, her morning blood sugar level is typically over 200 mg/dl. Given these numbers, her doctor has told her that it may be time to begin insulin soon.

Dana knows that her problem kicks in during the evening hours. On a typical night, shortly after dinner, she starts to feel anxious and uncomfortable. As though drawn by a powerful magnet, she steals into the kitchen, where she nibbles at whatever little goodies she can find (usually pie, cake, and cookies). After her snack, she gets angry with herself and retreats to the living room. Throughout the evening, however, she returns to the kitchen again and again, consuming ever larger and larger amounts. And once this dance begins, she finds herself unable to stop it.

By the end of the evening, Dana is angry with herself and angry with her diabetes. And strangely, as delicious as she imagines that her cakes and cookies will taste, she doesn't really find them that satisfying anymore. By the next morning, she has committed herself to redoubling her willpower and never letting another nighttime eating episode occur. Still, she is as powerless as is the werewolf in the grip of a full moon. Despite her very best efforts, including a recent meal-planning session with a dietitian, her nighttime

overeating episodes are occurring more frequently.

### **Identifying a werewolf**

Like Dana, all victims of werewolf syndrome share three common characteristics.

First, they tend to eat reasonably well during daylight hours. Unfortunately, they sometimes eat too well. In other words, they restrict their daytime eating so severely that their meals are often too small, too unsatisfying, or too boring.

Second, people who have this problem tend to lose control during the evening hours. During their nighttime forays, they commonly eat large amounts of food, especially tasty "forbidden foods" that are certain to drive up blood sugar levels. They feel powerless to stop, even though they may not be hungry at all.

Overeating episodes are usually not organized snacks or meals. Rather, people often eat while standing in front of the refrigerator or at the kitchen counter. Or, like Dana, werewolf eaters may sneak between the kitchen and the rest of the house, only pausing for nibbles, but returning again and again for little snacks that can add up to quite a bit. Remarkably, many werewolf eaters are never sure what they really want to eat; they wander from one food to the next, but nothing ever hits the spot.

Third, people with werewolf syndrome tend to drive themselves crazy in the process! Rather than enjoying this plunge into an eating frenzy, they end up tormenting themselves. Not only is their eating rarely pleasurable, they are also likely to be furious with themselves afterward and feel guilty or depressed about what they have done. Because of these feelings, they tend to feast alone. Unfortunately, no matter how much they punish themselves and no matter how strong their self-discipline may be, they are usually unable to prevent further bouts of werewolf eating.

When you are trying to manage a tough challenge like diabetes, living with werewolf syndrome is even more of a problem. Frequent nighttime eating can lead to significant weight gain as well as chronically elevated blood sugar levels. In either case, diabetes can become more and more difficult to control, so understanding the problem and taking action to solve it are essential. If you are a victim of werewolf syndrome, take heart; despite its sharp claws and scary appearance, the werewolf can be tamed.

### **What brings out the werewolf?**

In contrast to the classic werewolf tales, werewolf eating is not really caused by magical spells, the bite of another werewolf, or the rising of the full moon. The real triggers are, unfortunately, a bit more mundane.

**Stomach hunger.** If your daytime meals are typically small, it's likely that you'll become hungry in the evening. Perhaps you've been on a diet and are eating as little as possible. Perhaps you're feeling so bad about *last* night's binge that you've decided to punish

yourself and eat only popcorn today. Or maybe you're trying to follow a diabetes meal plan that is just too limited and restrictive for you. In any of these cases, your stomach growls at you louder and louder throughout the day. And by evening, even though your willpower may be incredibly strong, the biological urge to eat becomes irresistible. Unfortunately, when in a state of overwhelming hunger, you are unlikely to eat just a small amount. The mind and body overreact and become voracious. Thus, werewolf eating can actually be caused by dieting and other major food restrictions.

**Eyeball hunger.** What if you eat plenty of food during the day, but still feel hungry at night? Your stomach may be full, but your eyes, mouth, and brain may actually be starving for food. This can occur when you are not satisfied with your food choices at mealtimes.

Dana, for example, ate a sufficient amount of food during the day to ward off stomach hunger in the evening, and yet she couldn't control her eating at night. As it turned out, Dana's daytime meals were completely uninteresting to her. Being a perfectionist, she had strictly followed the food choices her dietitian had selected for her (to make sure that her carbohydrate intake was balanced during the day, to avoid weight gain, and to provide good nutrition), without considering her own personal tastes and desires. In the end, she treated her meals as if they were merely fuel for her machine. She admitted that nothing she ate hit the spot and that she felt she was eating "nothing but birdseed" all day. And so, not surprisingly, during the quiet and unstructured hours of the evening, a part of her brain would revolt and seek relief from this feeling of deprivation. Then she would search out the truly satisfying foods that she never allowed herself to eat during the day.

When your diabetes management plan or your weight-loss plan is too restrictive (in terms of food *types*, not just food *amounts*), you may be depriving yourself of the joys of eating: the sensory stimulation and satisfaction that your mind and body crave. Eventually, you may rebel and try to satisfy in one evening all those cravings you have so carefully repressed during the day.

**Boredom.** If your evenings just aren't very exciting, it's normal to look for ways to spice them up. Many people report that werewolf eating begins when they feel understimulated, dissatisfied, or lonely at night. They may be watching television, but they aren't really interested in what they are watching. They may wish they had someone to talk to or to do something with, but there is no one at hand. At times like these, even though they're not hungry at all, a trip to the kitchen may feel like the only pleasure or distraction available. In the end, however, most people discover that overeating rarely relieves boredom.

**Unconscious eating.** Many werewolf eaters have reported that they will innocently sit down to watch television with a box of cookies, crackers, or chips by their side. The next thing they know, the box of cookies is empty and there are crumbs all over their shirts. What happened? Did someone break into the house, knock them unconscious, eat all the cookies, and then sprinkle crumbs all over them? Well, probably not. Werewolf eating may occur when you are preoccupied with another activity that has become linked, by

habit, to eating. Such activities commonly include reading, doing household chores, or watching television.

For example, one werewolf eater noted that, without ever thinking about it, he ate a quart of ice cream each night as he read the newspaper. The mere act of picking up the newspaper was an unconscious trigger to start eating. This was such an automatic behavior for him that he tended to ignore all the subtle but important body cues that might have prevented him from overeating. When he finally paid attention, he realized that he wasn't that hungry and that he really didn't like the taste of ice cream as much as he thought he did.

**Anger and anxiety.** Negative emotions are a common trigger for werewolf syndrome. If you're feeling angry, nervous, sad, frustrated, or lonely, you may try to comfort yourself through eating. For example, Dana was rarely aware of why she felt anxious in the evening, but reaching out for her favorite foods was a very familiar way for her to soothe herself.

For most of us, eating has been used as a strategy for emotional calming since childhood. In fact, we often regard certain familiar foods as "comfort foods" simply out of habit or because they evoke soothing feelings or memories. Unfortunately, eating is not a very effective means of stress management. No matter what we eat, the bad feelings don't recede for very long. And after a serious bout of werewolf eating, there is even more to feel bad about!

To make matters worse, once a werewolf eating episode has begun, it is almost impossible to stop. A common reaction is, "Well, I've blown it now, so I might as well just keep eating, and I'll start fresh tomorrow." With permission now granted, the floodgates for eating are opened. The werewolf may emerge night after night, in part because of people's typical responses to these episodes: To compensate for overeating the night before, many people will start the new day by restricting their eating even more severely. This can lead to more hunger and even stronger feelings of deprivation, which results in the reemergence of the werewolf that evening.

### **Seven steps to control**

To defeat the werewolf, something greater than willpower is necessary. Take the case of Margaret, a 67-year-old widow who has had diabetes for 11 years. For the past decade, she had been struggling with obesity and chronically high blood sugar levels. As an example of her daily battle, Margaret reported that she placed a bowl of M&M's, her favorite food, on her coffee table each and every evening "just in case guests arrived." The truth was, however, she almost never had guests. Each evening, she would sit down to watch TV (with her bowl of candy always within arm's reach) and within a few hours, the bowl was empty. She berated herself for her lack of willpower. But Margaret did not really need more willpower. Instead, she needed to use common sense and think more clearly about what exactly was triggering her overeating. This way she could, with help, devise strategies for overcoming those problems. Here are seven of the most useful

strategies.

**1. Alternative nighttime activities.** If you think that your nighttime overeating may be caused by boredom, it's time to find some other ways to enliven your evenings. During the hours when the werewolf starts to prowl, add some structure to your life by trying a new activity. For example, you might take a walk, call a friend, take a bath, or write that letter you've been meaning to write. It is especially important to pick an activity that is not passive (such as watching TV), not related to food, and that might even be fun. Actively doing something can help to interrupt your normal habits (such as eating a box of cookies while reading the newspaper), help to take you away from the temptations of your kitchen, and stimulate your mind and body. Many a werewolf has been halted in his tracks by such a strategy, so give it a try!

**2. Make your environment work for you.** Like Margaret, your most important strategy may be to alter your "eating geography." If you tend to eat unconsciously while reading or watching TV, consider ways to *physically* reduce those temptations. For instance, if you have a soft spot for candy, make it less accessible. Put sweets away in the cupboards, or don't buy them at all. If you tend to eat while watching TV, experiment with some alternative evening activities, such as reading, walking, knitting, or making phone calls.

**3. Change your daytime eating.** If your daytime eating is too restricted, leaving you hungry or dissatisfied by evening, consider adjusting your meal plan. This is best done in consultation with a dietitian. Together, you can experiment with ways to reduce feelings of stomach hunger, perhaps by increasing your intake of fruits and vegetables, which could raise the amount of food you eat without adding too many calories. You can also work to limit eyeball hunger, perhaps by incorporating small amounts of "forbidden foods" like chocolate into your daily meal plan. By evening, you will then feel more satisfied and less deprived.

**4. Regular nighttime snacking.** For some people, the more they try to avoid nighttime eating, the more insistent the werewolf becomes. If this sounds like you, the solution may be to incorporate a regular snack into your evening routine. In other words, if the werewolf continues to visit you each night, despite all of your best efforts, it may be necessary to make a compromise. Try this experiment for a week (one night won't be enough): Schedule an enjoyable, satisfying snack each night, at a time shortly before you might start overeating. To be on the safe side, you might want to talk to a dietitian about adjusting your other meals accordingly.

Dana tried this approach and chose to schedule a time for a small plate of cookies every night. By giving herself permission to enjoy such forbidden foods every evening, she found herself less hungry, more satisfied, and less anxious during the remainder of the evening. Thus, she was able to avoid her typical nightly binge of *many* cookies, pie, and cake.

**5. Alternative strategies for resolving negative feelings.** If your werewolf syndrome is typically triggered by negative emotions like anger, sadness, or anxiety, it is important to

take time to identify those feelings and to explore the stresses that lie behind those emotions. This way, you are more likely to discover an effective way to resolve those feelings, rather than drowning them in food.

Dana was able to do this by talking about her feelings with a close friend. She realized that her evening anxiety would build each night, shortly after her husband sat down to watch TV. For the rest of the evening, he would completely ignore her, and she would start wondering where the love had gone in their marriage and whether their relationship would survive. Soon thereafter, she would begin her forays into the kitchen. Once Dana realized the source of her anxiety, she courageously chose to confront the situation. By talking to her husband about her feelings and needs (and by listening to his, as well), the quality of their evenings together improved dramatically, her feelings of anxiety were alleviated, and her werewolf syndrome was greatly eased.

**6. Make use of your friends and family.** Werewolf syndrome is usually a solitary and lonely experience. Overcoming this torturous habit is difficult, especially when it involves new actions like taking a walk, changing your eating patterns, or redesigning your eating geography. Consider how your friends and family can help you out. Maybe you would be more willing to take a nighttime stroll if you had some company. Perhaps it would be easier to reduce your TV snacking if your spouse agreed to cut back as well. Or maybe if you didn't feel obligated to keep the house stocked with cookies for the kids, you'd have an easier time dodging them yourself. Take a risk and ask your loved ones for specific help and support. Remember, most of the actions you would like them to share with you will be good for *their* health as well.

**7. Increasing your eating awareness.** While this idea may seem odd, learning how to heighten your enjoyment of food can be a powerful way to weaken the werewolf within. Because werewolf eating is often so rapid, unconscious, and full of anxiety, victims rarely have a deep awareness of what they are eating. For example, when she was watching TV, Margaret could munch through several bowls of M&M's without even realizing it. The reason was that her attention was usually focused on the television, not on her candy consumption. When she began to limit her indulgences to times when the television was off, and then focused her full attention on eating her candies, she found that she enjoyed them much more. However, she also found—to her great surprise—that she became full after only a few handfuls. In other words, by paying close attention to what she was eating, she began to notice and respond to the subtle cues of satiety.

Try this experiment on your own. Bring your favorite werewolf food to a quiet, restful place. (On your first go, you might fare better if you don't do this in the evening.) Sit down and make sure there are no other distractions. Focus all of your attention on the sensory experience of what you are eating. You might even want to close your eyes with each bite. You don't have to try to enjoy it or hate it; just taste it as deeply and fully as you can.

Try this "eating awareness" exercise for at least ten minutes, five days in a row, and see what happens. It may sound odd to recommend eating a food like candy or cookies that

can raise your blood sugar. However, as a victim of werewolf syndrome, you are likely to eat these foods anyway (and we know that trying to use willpower to deprive yourself of these foods usually doesn't work). Why not experiment with eating these goodies in a healthier, more controlled manner? To be safe, consider talking to your health-care provider about adjusting your medicines and meals accordingly.

### **Defeating the werewolf**

By following these seven strategies, Dana was able to conquer her werewolf eating. Most important, she adjusted her food choices and meal plan so that her meals were more personally enjoyable (while still quite nutritious), she incorporated a tasty snack into her evenings, and she resolved her nighttime feelings of anxiety by confronting her husband about her frustrations. As her nighttime overeating ceased, her blood sugar dropped to near-normal levels, her anger with her diabetes disappeared, and her mood improved significantly.

Margaret, too, was successful. She was able to remove her M&M's from the coffee table, practiced the "eating awareness" exercise with all of her most tempting foods, and asked a neighbor to start an evening walking program with her. With a significant reduction in her nighttime overeating, her blood sugar level and weight began to drop slowly, and her energy level and mood began to climb.

While battling werewolf syndrome is not easy, it can be done. By recognizing and understanding your situation, carefully considering your triggers to overeating, refusing to blame yourself any longer, and taking thoughtful action, you can successfully begin this process of change.

---

*William Polonsky is a clinical psychologist and a certified diabetes educator. He is Assistant Professor in Psychiatry at University of California San Diego and Head of the Health Psychology Division, Naval Medical Center, San Diego, California.*

---