Holidays bring diet-killing snacks, but you can fight the temptation without ruining all the fun

Ask Rex Huppke: I Just Work Here

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The problem with the bags of treats and trays of cookies that appear around the office this time of year is that if you don't eat them you get sent to prison. At least, that's what I told myself several years and several thousand Snickers ago.

I now weigh 678 pounds and have caramel stuck in my keyboardddddddddddd — sorry — but on the plus side, I can hear M&M's being poured into a bowl from 3/4 of a mile away.

Most of us are almost constantly attempting to get healthier, and the workplace, particularly around the holidays, can be a real trap. The desire to share — one of humankind's more annoying tendencies — puts cubicle-bound people in an environment of unhealthy snacks, creating what dieting experts call a bad "choice architecture."

"This environment where there's tasty food all over the place is a really, really difficult choice architecture," said Bonnie Spring, director of the Center for Behavior and Health at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. "Most of our approaches to weight loss have focused on willpower — we say it's an individual responsibility. That's true, but there's also a very large environmental component to it."

If you're dieting, you usually clear your house of unhealthy food. But then you come to work and find that Hal in accounting brought his sumptuous chocolate-caramel brownies and, well, it would almost be rude not to have one.

"It's not hard to gain weight," Spring said. "Essentially, to gain a pound you need 3,500 calories. If you just eat a piece of cake each day for 10 days, you've got it. And the holiday season goes for more than 10 days, so it's not magic how it happens."

Brian Wansink, director of Cornell University's Food and Brand Lab, literally wrote the book on this subject. It's called "Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think."

"Free food's a tough thing," he said. "It's hard for us to refuse free food, in part because of what the gesture means to us and because everybody likes a bargain."
Wansink's research found that if you put a candy dish by your desk, you'll eat an extra 225 calories per day, or roughly nine Hershey's kisses. However, if you move that dish 6 feet away, you'll eat only an extra 100 calories per day, or four kisses.

This shows that we office dwellers are mindless opportunists. If it's there, and within relatively easy reach, we'll pounce.

So how do we change this choice architecture that's so perilous to our waistlines?

All-out bans on treats — or on anything, for that matter — are ineffective and annoying, regardless of what your carrot-stick-snacking, ultrathin colleague says.

However, it's a fair bet that you're not the only person in the office who wants to avoid a daily onslaught of goodies. Spring suggests raising the issue with co-workers and finding an acceptable way to limit everyone's exposure to high-calorie food.

"You can try to modify the choice architecture by restricting the treats to a time when there's a party," Spring said. "That sort of contains the temptation into a more limited time and space, so the treats aren't just there all the time, available for you to graze on them."

And it still lets people bring in food and share it, an important experience for many.

"There's a sense of bonding that happens when we share food that someone has brought in," Spring said. "Those are really good experiences, and we don't want to lose them. We want to have people proactively go into events where they can share holiday treats in moderation and enjoy them, and not have the feeling of just being out of control all the time."

Wansink also acknowledged the importance of people providing festive food, but he suggested maintaining personal responsibility in the transaction.

"Let the giver do what they want to do," he said. "But as a receiver, you can do this right in the same way you can do it right if your mother or grandmother tells you at the Thanksgiving table to have more dressing. Just take a half spoonful, instead of a full one."

These are sensible approaches to controlling the tsucrose tsunami.

If for any reason you can't spark a grass-roots uprising for moderation, I have an alternative solution: Send your treats to me.

Given my very important role in America's workplace culture, I will gladly throw myself on the rich and chewy candy grenade, saving everyone from obesity and adult-onset diabetes. That's what heroes do.

If you spot a bowl of mini Twix bars, a festively frosted sheet cake or any kind of pastry, pop it in an envelope and ship it to: Rex Huppke, Holiday Snack Devourer, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave, Chicago IL 60611.

I'll make sure everything is properly consumed, assuming a motorized lift is available to hoist me out of my cubicle and roll me to the mail room.

TALK TO REX: Ask workplace questions — anonymously or by name — and share stories with Rex Huppke at ijustworkhere@tribune.com, like Rex on Facebook at facebook.com/rexworkshere, and find more at chicagotribune.com/ijustworkhere.