

Food Addiction or Bingeing Disorder

Food addiction is a very real, very serious condition. Some experts refrain from using the term “food addiction” and prefer “bingeing disorder.” Still, it does appear that food addiction or bingeing disorder involves the same brain circuits and underlying genetic susceptibilities as addiction to drugs.

People who are addicted to food often:

- Are preoccupied or obsessed with food that goes beyond eating (eg, recipe collecting, food shopping, reading about food, etc)
- Show a lack of self control around food
- Have episodes of bingeing and purging
- Associate food with pleasure and comfort, requiring food to have these feelings
- Exhibit strong physical cravings for food
- May hide or hoard food
- Display intense feelings of shame or remorse after eating
- Can not stop eating, even when they want to
- Eat in secret
- Put the rest of life on hold until they are able to get food issues under control
- Often consume food so fast that it is not even tasted

Physical symptoms

Physical symptoms of food addiction include:

- Frequent headaches
- Insomnia
- Irritability and other mood changes
- Depression
- Lethargy
- Often overweight, but not always

Reasons for addiction

Foods high in fat or sugar stimulate the feel-good endorphins in the brain, resulting in pleasant feelings and calmness. This spurs us on to eat these foods again and again to get the same “endorphin rush.” These pleasant feelings may subside as we repeatedly eat the same foods, and much like a drug addict, some people will begin to seek out foods with more sugar and more fat in an effort to replicate the initial endorphin rush.

Research has shown that obese mice have a defective central dopamine center, the part of the brain responsible for registering pleasure from eating. Obese people actually enjoy food less than their leaner counterparts, and this leads them to eat more and more food in an attempt to enjoy their food more—a vicious cycle. Food eventually becomes a habit, and the sight of certain restaurants, vending machines, etc can cause a strong craving for a certain food or type of food.

Curing food addiction

Curing food addiction may involve:

- Working with a dietitian or eating disorder specialist
- Seeing a psychologist or behavioral therapist
- Enrolling in Overeaters Anonymous or Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous
- Participating in alternative therapies, such as deep breathing or meditation

Obese people who stop eating high-energy density food crave it less with time. Many individuals find the following suggestions helpful for dealing with food addiction or bingeing disorder:

- Devising a structured eating plan
- Learning proper portion sizes
- Changing the way that you feel about food (as a source of emotional satisfaction)
- Rehearsing how to avoid foods and situations that are too difficult to resist
- Practicing distraction when cravings set in

References and recommended readings

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