

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Food Addiction A Myth”

Food addiction is a concept that researchers use to describe compulsive eating habits in humans, which may resemble addiction-like behaviors. However, there is no universally accepted clinical definition of “food addiction,” and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* does not list it as a condition. Some researchers propose food addiction as a potential underlying cause of obesity in the U.S. and liken it to the addictive behaviors that people with substance abuse often display. Environmental cues, which include the sight, smell, and even appearance of foods, may trigger food cravings. Research indicates that some individuals may be more likely than others to experience addiction to palatable foods — meaning foods that are high in fat and sugar. Researchers have identified some behaviors associated with this concept. These include compulsive overeating, even in the absence of hunger; cravings for high fat and sugary foods; difficulty in controlling food intake; and binge eating and disordered eating patterns. Data from 2009, 2011, 2016, 2018, and 2019, among others, have highlighted that palatable foods — or even foods in general — stimulate the same parts of the brain and share the same neuronal activities as illicit substances. Foods and illicit substances both result in the release of the hormones, such as dopamine, and endogenous opioids that the body naturally produces. These hormones are a part of the “reward system” — or the mesolimbic circuit — in the brain, which is responsible for motivation, want, desire, and cravings. Some studies even suggest that it is the anticipation of food rather than the consumption itself that may trigger food addiction — a “seeking” behavior that people with substance use disorder often display. In theory, it is possible to explain this behavior by the phenomenon of incentive sensitization, which posits that it is possible for a person to want something even if they do not like it, as long as it stimulates the pleasure centers in their brain. Whichever way this association may lie, a 2017 review cites evidence that behaviors linked with food addiction occur at notably higher levels in people seeking bariatric or weight loss surgeries. Although both foods and drugs stimulate the reward system and pleasure center in the brain, foods do not exert the same pharmacological effect as drugs. Not only is it difficult to classify the misuse of foods, but researchers have not yet determined which nutrient or combination of nutrients causes food addiction. Studies in rats have identified that a diet high in fat and sugar — as many processed foods are — can induce addiction-like behaviors.

In the America that I love, we realize that food addiction continues to be a controversial topic, with studies providing inconclusive results about whether this curious phenomenon is real.

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

rhowesmd@hughes.net | www.iwillfindthecure.org

