

# Food Addiction

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“There is no love sincerer than the love of food,” said George Bernard Shaw. Indeed many of us spend our waking time on thinking and talking about food or preparing and consuming it. Our media is overwhelmingly consumed with marketing food produce and even encouraging consumption of cheaper high calorie food. This, paralleled with our growing anxiety over the dangers of food excesses and weight management, is clearly the hottest topic of debate in any social milieu.

Undeniably, we are experiencing difficulties in life as a result of the way

we eat. We have readily available world cuisines contributing to our limited ability of controlling what we eat, and we are eating even when not hungry. There is growing recognition that our love for food has entered the realms of compulsive behaviour, perhaps even a habit or addiction.

## Can Food Be As Addictive As Drug And Alcohol?

The idea that a person can be addicted to food has recently gotten more scientific support. Unlike drugs

and alcohol, food is essential for living; therefore the divide between necessities, occasional excesses and compulsion can be blurry. But, experts have identified similarities of food addiction that mimic drugs and alcohol addiction.

Studies on both humans as well as animals show that food, especially those high in sugar, salt and fat content, are biologically addictive. They activate the same reward, pleasure, self-control, motivation and memory area of brain as seen after taking addictive drugs like nicotine, heroin or cocaine.

In addition, these foods also release a pleasure inducing brain chemical called dopamine, which makes the individual want to re-experience the same sensation associated with a particular food. This sensation leads to cravings. Once a person gets into this vicious consumption-reward cycle, the need for food overrides other signals, even those of fullness and satisfaction. Other signals such as restraining eating for health reasons also get hampered. In other words, the person indulges in compulsive eating and loses all control. The result, individuals keep eating, even when they're not hungry.

Food addiction is a contemporary, perhaps even a controversial term used to describe a behaviour characterised by excessive craving for food and eating compulsively. The condition is not only manifested by abnormal food intake, but also craving and eating such foods that may be harmful to an individual. As with other addictions, an individual may show noticeable signs of addiction. Tolerance towards food is one such sign. The person finds himself wanting increased amounts of food only to find that food satisfies them less and less. As the satisfaction derived from food gets lesser, the person starts eating more in a bid to feel satisfied. Even, the negative consequences of eating, such as weight gain and adverse health effects, do not stop the person.

### Consequences Of Food Addiction On Physical And Mental Health

- ◆ Experts believe that food addiction may play an important role in obesity, which is at the root of several non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like cancer, diabetes, respiratory and heart diseases.
- ◆ We are what we eat. Amongst many factors for weight gain, excess food intake is by far the largest culprit.
- ◆ People of normal weight may

also struggle with food addiction, with their bodies being genetically programmed to handle the extra calories consumed better. Or, they may increase their physical activity to compensate for overeating.

- ◆ There is a growing debate that some individuals indulging in compulsive or comfort eating may be using it as a coping mechanism or even to fight off depression and anxiety. This means delay in needed treatment of mental health difficulties, prolonged suffering, and poorer outcome of the underlying condition.

### Identifying Food Addiction

We need to consider certain characteristics of food intake behaviour where the necessity for food turns into compulsion and dependency. There are countless questionnaires available to identify addictive behaviour including that for food addiction.

Ask yourself the following questions and if the answer to one or more is yes, you may have food addiction. Consider having it further explored with a specialist in addictive behaviour.

1. Do you think about food or your weight constantly?
2. Have you ever wanted to stop eating and found you just couldn't?
3. Are you secretive about eating and do you eat when you're not hungry?
4. Do you need to eat more and more, only to find that food satisfies less and less?
5. Has anyone ever approached you with concern about your eating habits?
6. Have you continued to consume food despite negative consequence, such as weight gain?
7. Do you need to eat more and more food to reduce negative emotions or increase pleasure?



### Treatments Available

- ◆ Recognition and acceptance of having a problem is the first step to recovery. Ideally, consult a psychiatrist or psychologist or a nutritionist with expertise in food addiction, for assistance in breaking the cycle of compulsive eating.
- ◆ Psychotherapeutic (talking therapy) intervention, based mainly on cognitive, behavioural and motivational therapies, may be required for understanding the problem behaviour and effecting sustained change.
- ◆ There are a growing number of programs based on the 12-step program (of AA - Alcoholic Anonymous, that has helped many people addicted to alcohol, drugs, or gambling) to help people who are addicted to food. Some use the principles of the 12-step program along with targeted diet, restricting intake of problem ingredients.
- ◆ Medication will have a limited role to play, unless there are other underlying psychological causes.

Unarguably, recovery from food addiction may be more complicated than recovery from other kinds of addictions. For example, an alcoholic may abstain from drinking but people who are addicted to food still need to eat. It is nevertheless clear that this is a behaviour that must be contained.