



GRUB IS A DRUG

Sure, you've eaten pastries every day this week, but you could stop any time. Right? Right? The season of sanctioned excess blurs the line between food as hobby and food as hit. We delve into the hotly debated topic of food addiction.

Words: Harriet Edmund

We all have moments of weakness, like polishing off those last two pieces of oozing garlic bread at dinner or chowing down a few extra Christmas chocolate truffles. But when does a food craving, a temptation or indulgence become a full-blown food addiction? For Kellee Waters of Food Addiction Australia, the signs were hard to spot. When her sister Angela died when she was 17, Waters started bingeing on creamy pastas and ice cream chased with brimming glasses of wine until she felt sick. But then, she'd always had a sweet tooth and she'd always been a bit of a Bridget Jones when the emotional going got tough; food was her go-to comfort. The telltale sign of addiction, however, was obsession. "At my worst, everything revolved around food, the scales, exercise,

poor body-image and self-esteem, and being a recluse at times because I was 'too fat to go out'," Waters recalls. After one such feeding frenzy, the now-psychologist would starve herself to quell the guilt and self-hatred, perpetuating a painful, destructive cycle.

It wasn't until the subject of food addiction came up at work almost 10 years ago that Waters – now a food addiction and obesity specialist, personal trainer and author on the topic – had her lightbulb moment, admitting she had a severe issue with food. She made it her mission to delve into the science behind the hotly debated theme. In recent years, dietitians, medicos and scientists

and overeaters themselves have gorged on the issue in what looks like an obligatory bid to explain the 'obesity crisis'. Proclamations of food dependency in popular books and media have met numerous academic studies dissecting the pathology of compulsive eating, variously condemning chemicals in 'trigger foods' (think sugar, wheat and certain additives) and putting food addiction down to a sort of addiction hypochondria. All in your head, lovely.

Classification doesn't faze Waters, who knows the devastation is real. She subscribes to the thinking, and research, that certain dopamine set-ups welcome food addiction. Some pundits swear certain foods are engineered to be addictive, as documented in David Kessler's *The End of Overeating*, while others espouse that people are not addicted to food in the same way as they are addicted to alcohol or drugs because the behaviour is more compulsive than addictive. Here's what we found.

Totally addicted

One sure way of knowing you have an addiction is when you lose control over your use of a substance or behaviour, says Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, head of Addiction Medicine at St Vincent's hospital in Melbourne. When it comes to food addiction, he says it makes sense for the brain to seek out certain behaviours that have a biological imperative like a survival benefit. And, of course, we all need food to survive. "Bears will seek out high-caloric foods as humans do, but unfortunately, high-caloric foods are all too abundant in the first world," he says.

It's this wealth of food choices and rising obesity levels that led Yale University researchers to launch the Yale Food Addiction Scale in 2008, to help study the eating habits of people around the world. The

research suggests that people with food addictions respond to food cues in much the same way that alcoholics respond to drinking cues, even suffering from withdrawal symptoms.

The debate about the definition of food addiction often centres on its terminology, says Dr Lloyd-Jones. "At times, criticism has been levelled at the use of the word 'addiction' as it is seen as pejorative, as is the word alcoholic. But for some this is liberating as an explanation of what they suffer from," he says.

"Addiction is stigmatised and perhaps considered to be too extreme a word for a behavioural state such as a binge eating disorder." Nonetheless, components of addiction including continuing the behaviour despite the adverse consequences, diminished self-control, compulsion, and appetitive urges or cravings are what many experts, including Waters, believe are evident in cases of food addiction.

So what's the difference between an emotional eater, when you turn to food for escape, and a food addict? Waters says it's the level of severity. "Both have the same psychological and biochemical imbalance, but an emotional eater will eat erratically while a food addict will need to down masses of the same foods every day."

Who, me?

Waters fears that food addiction is widespread in Australia, after a recent study conducted at the University of Newcastle quizzed 650 people about tolerance, withdrawal, desire and cravings for food. The preliminary results showed that most people exhibited at least one of the behaviours indicative of addiction.

A range of genetic, environmental and emotional factors can contribute to someone developing an addiction, explains Dr Lloyd-



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Jones. "Things like genetic influences and vulnerabilities or protective factors, exposure to the substance, societal influences, personality factors, such as someone who takes risks versus someone who avoids risks, impulse control, trauma, especially in the formative years, and co-morbid mental health disorders such as eating disorders."

Biologically some people's blood sugar levels can also play a role, says Tania Ferraretto, accredited practising dietitian and founder of Happy Healthy Me. "Some people who skip meals or eat food that results in sudden increases and decreases in blood sugar levels may be more likely to experience strong food cravings," she says.

Chem class

Ever eaten something and felt as if you're buzzing afterwards? That's a food high – when food releases feel-good hormones in the brain, making you want more. It happens when your blood sugar levels spike after eating high-GI or quick-release carbohydrates, says Ferraretto. But it can also be about taste and the way the brain's neurotransmitters, particularly cortisol, serotonin, dopamine and endogenous opioids, respond to food.

The 2008 Yale study and subsequent research published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* show that these neurotransmitters are affected by drugs and food alike. Dr Lloyd-Jones says this is because after prolonged use of alcohol and nicotine, and other substances like food, these neurochemicals act differently on the brain. "It is thought that this can lead to changes in cortisol secretion, a stress chemical, which may lead to changes in the way the brains of addicted individuals respond to stress. The brain may become relatively desensitised to normal levels of dopamine and require higher than normal levels to activate and experience pleasure."



FOUR TOP SIGNS THAT YOU ARE ADDICTED TO FOOD, according to expert Kellee Waters

- 1 You down loads of junk food or highly addictive foods packed with high saturated fat, sugar, refined carbs, flavour enhancers and artificial sweeteners
- 2 You need to have a particular food every day
- 3 If you don't have that food you go into withdrawal – feeling angry, anxious, tired and lacking focus
- 4 You binge eat

When it comes to the role of these neurotransmitters in food addiction, Waters explains each in her book *Food Addiction Therapy: The Simple Eating Plan*:

Cortisol > Stress management every day is important to reduce cortisol levels and will help to minimise cravings and balance your neurotransmitters and other hormones, she says. "The lower your stress levels, the lower your cortisol levels, the lower your cravings and need to artificially elevate your neurotransmitters via food."

Serotonin > Serotonin is associated with cravings and the need to self-medicate to minimise pain, discomfort, anxiety, stress or depression in addiction. It plays a mediating effect in impulsive action and choice in addiction.

Dopamine > The more unhealthy or addictive foods you eat, the more you are lowering your natural ability to produce dopamine, which then creates the vicious cycle of needing to elevate the dopamine levels in your brain by having a binge.

Endogenous opioids >

The restriction and deprivation representative of dieting and the diet mentality produces an increase in endogenous opioids, which can boost the reward and reinforcement effect of addiction foods, making you chase more.

Social side effects

Kristina Mamrot and her co-author of *Do You Really Want to Lose Weight?* Kate Swann say understanding the emotional and social contributors to overeating is the first step to recovering from food addiction (official or not).

"You need to understand which emotions contribute to the overeating, such as depression, anxiety, relationship difficulties, work stress, day to day problems, boredom, loneliness or anger," says Mamrot. She says most people with food issues turn to food when faced with stressors.

Socially, food addicts can dread eating in front of others because they feel too self-conscious, guilty and ashamed, or as if people are looking at them critically, while others throw themselves into extreme exercise regimes in a bid to

offset the excess calories and/or associated remorse.

Recover right

It's not simply a matter of going cold turkey when it comes to recovering from a food addiction, says Mamrot. "Without food, even the most obese person will die. So people who feel addicted have to continue a battle with every mouthful, every time they sit down to eat."

Waters says it is possible to beat food addiction with a do-it-yourself approach by making small changes to your diet and behaviour over several months to avoid withdrawal symptoms and setbacks. Start with changes like drinking an extra glass of water a day or reducing your portion size by 20 per cent for three weeks.

"Then it's about increasing the amount of healthy, natural neurotransmitter foods in your diet to help stabilise and balance your neurotransmitters throughout the day without causing spikes and falls that lead to cravings, emotional eating and bingeing," she says. To do this

she suggests replacing sugary faves like milk chocolate with dark chocolate and almonds, or yoghurt instead of ice cream and avocado ahead of margarine.

Adding protein at every meal and snack, such as nuts, seeds, nut meals, protein isolates, avocado and kidney beans, will work to connect the stomach and the brain, telling you when you are full. And eating smaller meals at least every four hours will also help minimise drops in blood sugar levels and going into starvation mode, which causes the need to feed and overeat, adds Waters.

Some natural therapy and food experts, such as Julie Ross, author of *The Mood Cure*, suggest boosting amino acid and omega-3 levels, which can help improve mood by increasing dopamine in the brain, and therefore helping people with

food issues to control their cravings. But Waters believes that most nutrients can be gained through a balanced diet and suggests always seeking medical advice before introducing any supplements or medications.

When it comes to your social calendar, choosing your engagements wisely can help you to avoid temptation – you don't always have to catch up with friends over dinner. Try meeting in the morning or taking a class together like yoga or dancing.

"Neuroplasticity means we all possess the ability to break habits and beliefs and create new ones," concludes Waters. "Whenever we move away from our comfort zones, it creates anxiety, but the more you engage in new habits or beliefs – like healthy eating – the stronger the new connection in your brain will become."

SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE

Certain foods are engineered to be addictive, argues Ferraretto. "In practice, foods that often come up are chocolate, lollies and even healthy carbohydrate sources like bread." The Yale Food Addiction Scale shows that people with food addiction can have difficulty controlling their intake of:



STARCHES

Starches like white bread, rolls, pasta, and rice



SALTY SNACKS

Salty snacks like chips, pretzels, and crackers



FATTY FOODS

Fatty foods like steak, bacon, hamburgers, cheeseburgers, pizza and French fries



SWEETS

Sweets like ice cream, chocolate, doughnuts, cookies, cake, lollies, ice cream

It's the high levels of saturated fat, sugar, refined carbohydrates, flavour enhancers and artificial sweeteners in these foods that cause spikes and falls in the brain's neurotransmitters, resulting in a constant withdrawal and re-feeding cycle, explains Waters. And the side effects are life threatening – many of her clients, for example, battle weight-related diseases such as diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and malnourishment. ■



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