

Food Addiction in Human Beings

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Introduction

Food addiction is a complex and controversial topic that has gained attention in recent years. It refers to a condition in which individuals have an intense and compulsive relationship with food, similar to the patterns observed in substance addiction. While food is essential for survival and enjoyment, some individuals may develop an unhealthy and problematic relationship with certain types of food, leading to loss of control, negative consequences, and impaired overall well-being.

Food addiction typically involves the consumption of highly palatable, processed foods that are high in sugar, fat, and salt. These foods can trigger pleasurable sensations in the brain, releasing dopamine and activating reward pathways, similar to the effects of drugs. Over time, individuals may develop a tolerance, requiring larger quantities or more stimulating food to experience the same level of satisfaction. This can lead to compulsive overeating, emotional eating, and a cycle of guilt, shame, and attempts to restrict or control food intake.

The consequences of food addiction can be significant and can impact both physical and mental health. Excessive consumption of unhealthy foods can contribute to weight gain, obesity, and a range of related health issues such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic disorders. Additionally, the emotional toll of food addiction can result in poor body image, low self-esteem, depression, and social isolation [1] (Figure 1).

Identifying food addiction can be challenging as it does not have official diagnostic criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). However, common signs and symptoms may include persistent cravings for specific foods, loss of control over eating, continued consumption despite negative consequences, and using food as a coping mechanism for emotional distress.

Treatment for food addiction often involves a multidisciplinary approach. This may include therapy or counselling to address underlying emotional issues, develop healthy coping mechanisms, and modify unhealthy eating patterns. Nutritional counselling and

education can help individuals make informed choices, establish balanced eating habits, and develop a healthier relationship with food. Support groups and peer support can also play a valuable role in providing encouragement, accountability, and a sense of community [2].

It is important to note that while the concept of food addiction is still evolving, the focus should be on promoting a balanced, mindful, and nourishing approach to eating. Seeking professional help from healthcare providers, nutritionists, or mental health specialists can provide guidance and support for individuals struggling with food addiction and help them embark on a path towards a healthier relationship with food.

Types of Food Addiction

Food addiction can manifest in various forms, and individuals may develop addictive patterns with different types of foods.

Here are some common types of food addiction

Sugar addiction: Sugar is one of the most commonly addictive substances in our diets. Highly processed and sugary foods, such as candies, pastries, sodas, and desserts, can trigger intense cravings and lead to a cycle of overconsumption. Sugar addiction can contribute to weight gain, insulin resistance, and other health problems.

Junk food addiction: Junk food addiction involves a dependency on highly processed, calorie-dense foods that are typically high in unhealthy fats, salt, and additives. Examples include fast food items, potato chips, sugary cereals, and processed snacks. These foods are designed to be highly palatable, and their consumption can lead to compulsive overeating and difficulty in controlling portion sizes [3].

Carbohydrate addiction: Carbohydrates, especially refined carbohydrates like white bread, pasta, and sugary cereals, can trigger addictive-like responses in some individuals. The rapid release of glucose into the bloodstream from these foods can lead to temporary feelings of pleasure and increased cravings for more carbohydrates.

Fast food addiction: Fast food addiction involves a dependence on convenience foods typically offered at fast-food restaurants. These foods are often high in calories, unhealthy fats, sodium, and additives. The



Figure 1: Symptoms of food addiction.

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combination of convenience, affordability, and the addictive properties of these foods can contribute to a cycle of frequent consumption and difficulty breaking free from unhealthy eating habits.

Processed food addiction: Processed foods, including packaged snacks, frozen meals, and pre-packaged sauces, can be addictive due to their high levels of sugar, salt, unhealthy fats, and additives. The combination of artificial flavours and additives can create a pleasurable eating experience and lead to cravings and overconsumption.

Emotional eating: Emotional eating refers to the use of food as a coping mechanism for dealing with emotions such as stress, sadness, or boredom. While emotional eating does not involve a specific type of food, it can lead to addictive patterns where individuals rely on food to soothe their emotional state rather than addressing the underlying issues.

Binge eating disorder: Binge eating disorder is a recognized eating disorder characterized by recurrent episodes of consuming large quantities of food in a short period, often to the point of discomfort or distress. Binge eating episodes are often accompanied by a sense of loss of control and feelings of guilt or shame. Although it is not strictly a food addiction, binge eating disorder shares similarities with addictive behaviors and can involve addictive-like patterns with various types of food.

Advantages of Food Addiction

It's important to clarify that food addiction itself is generally considered a negative and detrimental condition. However, in the context of discussing the potential advantages or positive aspects of addressing and overcoming food addiction, we can focus on the benefits that come from recovery and developing a healthier relationship with food.

These advantages may include

Improved physical health: Overcoming food addiction involves adopting a more balanced and nutritious diet. By reducing or eliminating the consumption of highly processed, unhealthy foods, individuals can experience improvements in their overall physical health. This may include weight loss or maintenance, better blood sugar control, reduced risk of chronic diseases, and increased energy levels.

Enhanced mental and emotional well-being: Food addiction can have a significant impact on mental and emotional well-being. By addressing and overcoming food addiction, individuals can experience improvements in mood, self-esteem, and body image. Breaking free from the cycle of guilt, shame, and negative emotions associated with food addiction can lead to a greater sense of self-worth and overall psychological well-being.

Increased self-control and mindfulness: Overcoming food addiction requires developing greater self-control and mindfulness around food choices and eating behaviors. Through the recovery process, individuals learn to identify triggers, manage cravings, and make conscious decisions about what, when, and how much they eat. This increased awareness and self-control can extend beyond food and positively impact other areas of life.

Improved relationships and social interactions: Food addiction can often lead to social isolation and strained relationships due to the preoccupation with food and difficulties around shared meals. By addressing and overcoming food addiction, individuals can rebuild and strengthen their social connections. They can participate in social

gatherings and activities without being consumed by food-related concerns, fostering healthier relationships with friends, family, and peers [4].

Development of healthy coping mechanisms: Food addiction often serves as a coping mechanism for dealing with stress, emotions, or boredom. Through recovery, individuals can explore and develop healthier coping mechanisms that are not centered on food. This can involve finding alternative ways to manage stress, practicing self-care, engaging in hobbies, or seeking support from others.

Enhanced quality of life: Overall, overcoming food addiction can lead to a significant improvement in one's quality of life. By regaining control over eating habits, individuals can experience a greater sense of freedom, improved physical and mental well-being, increased self-esteem, and a more positive outlook on life. They can enjoy a broader range of foods in moderation, without feeling controlled or consumed by unhealthy eating patterns.

Disadvantages of Food Addiction

Food addiction is generally considered a detrimental condition that can have numerous disadvantages and negative effects on individuals' lives.

Some of the disadvantages of food addiction include

Obesity and health issues: Food addiction often involves the consumption of highly processed, calorie-dense foods that are rich in unhealthy fats, sugar, and salt. Continuous overeating and indulgence in these foods can contribute to weight gain, obesity, and related health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and metabolic disorders.

Nutritional imbalances: Food addiction typically involves a strong preference for unhealthy, nutrient-poor foods. As a result, individuals with food addiction may not meet their nutritional needs, leading to deficiencies in essential vitamins, minerals, and other important nutrients. This can weaken the immune system, impair physical functioning, and contribute to a variety of health problems.

Emotional and mental health challenges: Food addiction can have a significant impact on emotional and mental well-being. Individuals with food addiction often experience guilt, shame, and a negative self-image associated with their eating behaviors. This can contribute to feelings of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social isolation. The cycle of overeating and subsequent negative emotions can perpetuate the addiction and lead to a diminished quality of life.

Disruption of daily life and relationships: Food addiction can disrupt daily life in various ways. Individuals may prioritize obtaining and consuming addictive foods over other activities, leading to neglect of responsibilities, reduced productivity, and impaired functioning in personal and professional spheres. Additionally, relationships with family, friends, and loved ones can be strained or negatively impacted due to the preoccupation with food, social isolation, or conflicts related to food choices.

Financial burden: Maintaining a food addiction can be financially burdensome. Highly processed and unhealthy foods are often more expensive than healthier alternatives, and the constant need to fulfill cravings and engage in excessive eating can lead to increased food expenses. This financial strain can further exacerbate stress and negatively impact overall financial well-being.

Physical discomfort and health risks: Frequent overeating and

binge eating episodes, common in food addiction, can cause physical discomfort, including bloating, gastrointestinal distress, and digestive issues. Moreover, the consumption of large quantities of unhealthy foods can increase the risk of developing conditions such as acid reflux, gastritis, and other gastrointestinal disorders.

Reduced quality of life: Food addiction can significantly diminish one's overall quality of life. The preoccupation with food, feelings of loss of control, negative self-image, and the physical and emotional consequences of the addiction can limit individuals' ability to enjoy life fully, engage in activities they once enjoyed, and maintain optimal physical and mental well-being.

When it comes to managing and addressing food addiction, taking certain precautions can be beneficial. While individual circumstances may vary, here are some general precautions to consider:

Seek professional help: It's important to consult with healthcare professionals, registered dietitians, or therapists specializing in eating disorders. They can provide a comprehensive assessment, guidance, and personalized strategies for managing food addiction.

Build a support system: Surround yourself with a supportive network of friends, family, or support groups who understand your struggles with food addiction. Having a strong support system can provide encouragement, accountability, and understanding throughout your journey.

Avoid trigger foods and environments: Identify the specific foods or environments that trigger your addictive eating patterns, and take precautions to avoid or minimize exposure to them. This may involve avoiding certain aisles in the grocery store, staying away from fast-food restaurants, or refraining from keeping trigger foods in your home.

Plan and prepare meals: Establishing a regular meal plan and preparing healthy meals in advance can help you stay on track and reduce impulsive food choices. Having nutritious, satisfying meals readily available can prevent the urge to indulge in addictive foods.

Practice mindful eating: Engage in mindful eating by paying attention to your hunger and fullness cues, savouring the flavours and textures of food, and eating without distractions. This can help you develop a healthier relationship with food, increase awareness of your eating habits, and prevent overeating.

Develop healthy coping mechanisms: Find alternative ways to cope with stress, emotions, or boredom that do not involve turning to food. Engage in activities such as exercise, meditation, journaling, or seeking support from a therapist to develop healthier coping mechanisms and manage emotional triggers.

Establish a balanced lifestyle: Focus on maintaining a balanced lifestyle that includes regular physical activity, sufficient sleep, and stress management techniques. Taking care of your overall well-being can reduce the likelihood of turning to food addiction as a means of coping [5].

Practice self-compassion: Be kind to yourself throughout the process of managing food addiction. Recognize that overcoming addiction is a journey that takes time and effort. Practice self-compassion, forgiveness, and patience, and celebrate small victories along the way.

Remember, every individual's journey with food addiction is unique, and it's important to tailor precautions and strategies to your specific needs. Seeking professional guidance can provide personalized

recommendations and support for managing food addiction effectively.

Precautions to be taken to Avoid Food Addiction

To prevent food addiction from developing or to avoid relapses if you have a history of food addiction, it's important to take certain precautions.

Here are some precautions to consider

Practice balanced and mindful eating: Adopt a balanced approach to eating by focusing on nutritious, whole foods that nourish your body. Avoid extreme or restrictive diets that may contribute to cravings and overeating. Practice mindful eating, paying attention to your hunger and fullness cues, and eating slowly to savor the flavors and textures of food [6].

Maintain a supportive environment: Surround yourself with a supportive environment that promotes healthy eating habits. Stock your pantry and refrigerator with nutritious foods, limit the presence of highly processed and addictive foods, and encourage family members or housemates to support your goals of avoiding food addiction.

Be mindful of triggers: Identify and be aware of the specific triggers that may lead to overeating or cravings. This can include emotional triggers, certain environments, or specific foods. By recognizing these triggers, you can develop strategies to manage them effectively, such as finding alternative activities or seeking support during challenging times [7].

Develop healthy coping mechanisms: Find alternative ways to cope with stress, emotions, or boredom that do not involve turning to food. Engage in activities such as exercise, meditation, hobbies, or spending time with loved ones. Developing healthy coping mechanisms can help prevent the reliance on food as a means of comfort or escape [8].

Establish regular eating patterns: Establish regular eating patterns by eating balanced meals at consistent times throughout the day. Avoid skipping meals or going for long periods without eating, as this can lead to excessive hunger and potential overeating [9].

Seek professional guidance: If you have a history of food addiction or are concerned about your relationship with food, consider seeking guidance from healthcare professionals, registered dietitians, or therapists specializing in eating disorders. They can provide personalized advice, support, and strategies to help you avoid food addiction and develop a healthier relationship with food.

Practice self-care: Prioritize self-care to maintain overall well-being. Engage in activities that promote relaxation, stress reduction, and emotional well-being. This can include activities like exercise, spending time in nature, practicing mindfulness or meditation, getting sufficient sleep, and seeking support from a therapist if needed [10].

Stay educated: Stay informed about nutrition, healthy eating habits, and the potential risks associated with food addiction. Understanding the impact of certain foods on your body and mind can help you make informed choices and be more aware of the potential dangers of addictive eating patterns.

Remember, prevention is key when it comes to food addiction. By implementing these precautions and developing a healthy relationship with food, you can reduce the risk of developing food addiction and maintain a balanced and nourishing approach to eating [11].

How to Create Awareness on Food Addiction

Creating awareness about food addiction is essential to help individuals recognize and understand the condition, its impact, and the available support.

Here are some ways to raise awareness about food addiction

Education and information: Share accurate and evidence-based information about food addiction through various platforms. This can include websites, social media posts, articles, and educational materials. Provide clear explanations of what food addiction is, its signs and symptoms, and the potential health consequences. Highlight the importance of seeking help and the available resources for support [12].

Public speaking and presentations: Offer to speak at community events, schools, workplaces, or support groups to educate others about food addiction. Prepare presentations that include information about its prevalence, contributing factors, and strategies for prevention and recovery. Share personal stories or testimonials to make the information relatable and impactful [13].

Social media campaigns: Utilize social media platforms to raise awareness about food addiction. Create informative posts, infographics, and videos to share facts, statistics, and personal stories. Use relevant hashtags and engage with your audience to encourage dialogue and understanding [14].

Collaborate with healthcare providers and organizations: Work with healthcare professionals, nutritionists, therapists, or eating disorder organizations to develop joint awareness campaigns. Collaborate on workshops, webinars, or panel discussions that focus on food addiction and its impact on physical and mental health. Leverage their expertise and networks to reach a wider audience.

Support groups and community events: Organize or participate in support groups or community events focused on food addiction. These gatherings provide a safe space for individuals to share their experiences, find support, and learn from one another. Encourage open discussions, guest speakers, and sharing of resources to create a supportive community.

Media outreach: Reach out to local newspapers, radio stations, or television channels to share stories, articles, or interviews related to food addiction. Raise awareness through interviews, feature articles, or news segments that shed light on the topic and the importance of early intervention and treatment.

Collaboration with schools and educational institutions: Work with schools, colleges, and educational institutions to incorporate information about food addiction into health education curricula. Offer presentations, workshops, or assemblies to educate students about the risks of food addiction, the impact on mental and physical health, and strategies for prevention and recovery [15].

Online resources and websites: Create or contribute to online resources and websites dedicated to food addiction. Develop informative content, provide self-assessment tools and list available treatment options and support groups. Make sure the information is reliable, accessible, and user-friendly.

Partner with local businesses: Collaborate with local restaurants,

grocery stores, or food establishments to promote healthier food options and educate customers about the dangers of addictive foods. Offer cooking classes, workshops, or recipe demonstrations that emphasize nutritious choices and mindful eating.

Personal advocacy: Share your own experiences or those of loved ones who have dealt with food addiction. By sharing personal stories, you can create empathy and understanding, inspiring others to seek help and support.

Remember, creating awareness is an ongoing effort, and it's important to tailor your approach to the specific audience and context. By combining multiple strategies, you can effectively raise awareness about food addiction and encourage individuals to seek help and support.

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