

Food Addiction: Hooked on Unhappiness

*Hangovers from eggs? Depression from milk?
Experts say up to 80 percent of Americans ruin
their emotional health
with common foods—and can't stop.*

BILL GOTTLIEB

Your Aunt Ethel eats strawberries and her eyes itch. Your son John gets diarrhea from clams. And if your next-door neighbor even *sniffs* cooked cabbage, she breaks out in hives.

Food allergy. Everybody is familiar with the *acute* kind, when eyes water or hives pop out minutes after you eat the guilty food. But someone who sits down every morning to a breakfast of eggs, toast and coffee may have a *chronic* food allergy—to eggs, toast and coffee.

Sound odd? It's not. Chronic food allergy isn't a strange medical subspecialty whose cases turn up once a decade. Some experts estimate that *60 percent* of the people at doctors' offices have symptoms either caused or complicated by chronic food allergy. One allergist even makes this bold assertion: "Food allergy is one of the leading causes of illness in Westernized society." So why isn't there a doctor in town who knows about it?

First, physicians aren't trained to recognize chronic food allergy. Second, it's a hidden disease—hidden even from the person who has it. Say you're allergic to wheat. All you know is that you're tired most of the time. Or headachy. Or depressed. Or nervous. Or that your muscles ache. You don't know that wheat is causing these problems. And you don't know that you're actually *addicted* to wheat—an addiction every bit

as real as an addiction to alcohol or drugs. It's a *food* addiction that is slowly destroying your health.

Food addiction: that's what a chronic food allergy really is. And since an addiction to food is basically like an addiction to anything else, we can understand it by looking at one of the most common addictions—to cigarettes.

The first time you smoked a cigarette (if there was a first time), you didn't "come alive with pleasure." Unlike the happy smokers in ads, you felt awful—dizzy and sick to your stomach. That was the first time. If you kept at it, the second time was a little easier, and the tenth time a snap. What happened was that your body *adapted* to the poisons in cigarette smoke, a reaction scientists call the "specific adaptation response." But adaptation leads to addiction.

Poisonous Pickup

The pickup a smoker gets from cigarettes is caused by the specific adaptation response, the body going into overdrive to deal with the poison. As the hours pass the adaptation stops; however, so does the pickup. And the smoker is dropped into nervousness, depression or headache, the withdrawal symptoms of a cigarette addict. He begins to have an instinctive, driving urge to feel good again—the craving for a

cigarette. He's hooked. And food addiction can hook you the same way.

Remember that food addiction is an allergy. Your big brother may have dared you to smoke that first cigarette, but nobody really knows why some people become allergic and others don't. (Hereditarity is a popular theory.) In any case, those who become allergic usually develop allergies to the substances they're exposed to most, such as pollen and dust. And sugar. And wheat. And corn. And eggs. The foods which, alone or as ingredients, most people eat every day, perhaps many times a day. When a person is allergic to pollen, his nose clogs. But when a person is allergic to a food, his body may cope with the allergy by gearing up a specific adaptation response.

Soon, a person craves the lift he gets from the foods he's allergic to. If he doesn't eat those foods, he begins to have withdrawal symptoms. (For instance, do you wake up in the morning feeling grouchy or with a headache, and do these symptoms stop with breakfast? Or is your midnight snack an absolute must? If so, you could very well be a food addict.) So he eats. And eats. And eats. Most likely, he doesn't even know he's addicted. He only knows that he feels good after eating his "favorite" food. But specific adaptation can't last forever. A panic button, it can be pushed only so often—then it breaks down. Scientists call this stage "exhaustion," and during exhaustion the allergy surfaces full force.

Food allergies have a target organ (a specific part of the body that they attack), which varies from person to person. Wheat, for example, may damage the digestive tract in one person; in someone else it might affect the heart, muscles or brain. As long as adaptive responses work, you never notice the steady erosion of health.

But when adaptive responses wear out, you finally become aware of a problem that's been going on for months or years.

Only when one or more of specific adaptive responses taper off and the stage of exhaustion is approached does he [the person with food addiction] start to complain—a change ordinarily regarded by all concerned as the onset of the present illness," writes Theron G. Randolph, M.D., a Chicago physician and expert on food addiction, in his book *Human Ecology and Susceptibility to the Chemical Environment* (Charles C. Thomas, 1978).

When the Target Is the Brain

And when the food addict starts to complain, it may be about *emotional* difficulties.

The brain, as we mentioned, is a target organ for food allergies. "If the part of the brain affected is one that controls certain behavior patterns, this allergic irritation will produce recognizable mental or behavior changes," says English psychiatrist Richard Mackarness in his book *Eating Dangerously* (Harcourt, 1976). And these "mental changes" aren't for the better.

In his book *Food Allergy* (PSG, 1978), Frederic Speer, M.D., includes a list of emotional problems that have been caused by food addiction:

"Increase in temper; screaming attacks; patient is mean or sulky, irritable, whining, impatient, quarrelsome, sensitive, easily hurt, unhappy, morbid, depressed, restless, tense, nervous, jumpy, fearful, anxious, irresponsible, erratic, uncooperative, unpredictable, pugnacious, or cruel; can't be pleased; is not open to reason; cries without cause; worries, feels terrible, contemplates suicide; is nervous and high strung; chews clothes and bedclothes; has nightmares; loses pride in work, in clothing, and in cleanliness; doesn't care; can't make decisions; loses interest in the opposite sex; has childish compulsions."

You'd be hard pressed to think of a negative emotional response that isn't on the list. "Food addiction is like that," says William Philpott, M.D., an Oklahoma City

specialist in food allergy. "It can cause any type of emotional problem.

"But usually," he says, "a food addiction causes either a heightened or a lessened response. A person becomes either manic or depressed, wildly excited or totally apathetic."

The reason for these ups and downs, Dr. Philpott told PREVENTION, is that a food addiction abnormally increases or decreases the amount of neurotransmitters in the brain, the chemicals responsible for determining most behavior. Food addiction also causes emotional upset by swelling brain tissues, which irritate sensitive nerves. (This type of swelling, says Dr. Philpott, is responsible for 69 percent of all headaches!)

'Aggressive' or Allergic?

Barbara Solomon, M.D., a specialist in food allergy, told PREVENTION a case history of a young man whose severe mood swings were caused by food sensitivity.

"A 17-year-old boy came into my office with many of the signs of a chronic food allergy: blotchy skin, swollen eyes, red nose. I tested him for 200 foods, and found that he was allergic to 70. This boy had been going to a psychiatrist for six years, and had been labeled an 'aggressive personality.' He told me himself that he was a 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde type' and that he would suddenly feel violent and cruel. Well, after he stopped eating the foods he was allergic to, he simply lost that 'aggressive personality' and was discharged by his psychiatrist.

"One day, however, he ate squash, a food he is allergic to. Well, he went right down to the police station in his town, planted himself at the front desk and irrationally began 'demanding his rights.' They told him to beat it. But he was back every day for the next three days. You see, it takes four days for a food to leave the system. After four days, he was back to normal."

Not everyone with a food addiction behaves that strangely.

Anxiety, nervousness, apathy—common emotional problems—can be caused by a food addiction. But how can you tell if your tendency to loaf on the job is caused by a loaf of bread?

One way to tell if you have a food addiction, says Dr. Philpott, is to deliberately skip a meal. If, after a few hours, you begin to feel bad—not just hungry, but *very* irritable, tense, headachy or nauseous—chances are you're addicted to a food and have begun to experience withdrawal symptoms. Another sign of food addiction, he says, is overweight.

"After a person becomes allergic to one substance, the allergy usually spreads to other foods and to chemicals in the environment."

Dr. Philpott believes that 80 percent of all Americans have a food addiction.

Reprinted from PREVENTION Magazine, June, 1979 issue.