Dear Alice,

How is food addiction similar to drug addiction?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It sounds like you are asking if food is just another substance to which people might become addicted. When it comes to the facts about food addiction, the simple answer is? it?s complicated. Why? Well, not only can the boundaries of normal and disordered eating be difficult to untangle, but the concept of ?addiction? can be tricky to nail down, too. In a substance use disorder ? a ?classic? addiction to something such as drugs or alcohol ? a health care provider would evaluate whether a person?s behavior met several criteria of addiction before diagnosing her/him. When it comes to trying to hammer out what ?food addiction? really means, most researchers have found that there?s not quite enough evidence yet that an addiction to food falls into the same diagnostic category as classic substance use disorders. Long story short, the biggest difference between the two is that a drug addiction is a diagnosable condition whereas food addiction is not. However, this doesn?t mean that a person who is troubled by a compulsion to eat is on their own without any help! Working with a health care provider to pinpoint potential underlying reasons for an overwhelming desire to eat, or trying out different ways to restructure eating habits could help.

Scientists? understanding of food addiction is still a bit up in the air, but here?s a brief rundown of what?s known thus far: In studies of animals, researchers have found that some of the same pathways in the brain that are behind substance use disorders might also play a role in eating behavior. For example, when rats are given a lot of sugar or fat (a.k.a., for which foods that both humans and rats will clamor), their brains released lots of dopamine ? a brain chemical that can bring feelings of happiness. These feelings made the rats want to eat more and more, similar to the way substance use escalates over time in other addictions. The researchers then took away these tasty foods after the rats had been allowed to eat them for long periods of time. Following this denial of tasty foods, the rats showed depressed behavior, similar to withdrawal from other substances in human addictions. However, there?s a big but? here: similar withdrawal from a certain foods hasn?t been observed in humans, and this is one of the main reasons that it is tricky to define food addiction. While studies of food behaviors in animals provide a little glimpse at how people might become ?addicted? to eating, the general consensus is that there?s not enough evidence of food addictions in
humans to classify it as a true substance use disorder.

Just because food addiction isn’t technically a diagnosable condition doesn’t mean there’s no hope for people who feel like their eating behavior is out of control or troublesome. Each person’s relationship with food is different and complex. If you or someone you know experiences any of the following symptoms, it’s possible that there’s another physical or psychological condition related to eating behavior and that it might be useful to chat with a health care provider, mental health professional, or registered dietitian about it:

- Overwhelming cravings for specific foods that go beyond regular hunger
- Binge eating, or consuming large amounts of food in one sitting (again, beyond the point of regular hunger)
- The feeling that you can’t stop eating once you’ve started
- Negative feelings or emotions that are disruptive to your daily life

For even more information on disordered eating, symptoms, and ways to get help, you may want to check out the Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders section of the Go Ask Alice! archive. If you’d like the scoop on related mental health conditions and addictions, consider browsing the Alcohol & Other Drugs archive or the Obsessive & Compulsive Behavior archive as well. And, stay tuned as researchers continue to unravel the story of food addiction.

Alice!

Category:
Emotional Health
Obsessive & Compulsive Behavior
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Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders

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