

Trigger Foods and Craving

The concept of “food addiction” has been used to describe the super-users of junk foods, colas, and chips who seem to be unable to control their overeating. It has been proposed that there could be a physiological basis for the craving and overeating behaviors based on the brain science around addiction to alcohol, drugs, and smoking.

A genetic difference in the brains of individuals with these forms of addiction has been demonstrated (1). There is a 40% decrease in the protein that receives input from the brain chemical, dopamine, which acts to activate the reward center in the brain. The addictive behaviors with food, drugs and alcohol increase dopamine signaling. In individuals with fewer receivers for these signals, it is proposed that they overstimulate with the substance to which they are addicted including certain foods in order to satiate the reward center.

While there are numerous experiments in animals and humans consistent with this idea, it may also be that there are a number of psychological factors at work that make it difficult for individuals to resist overeating tasty foods in an environment that offers so many opportunities for eating.

Food cravings are intense desires to eat a specific food. Individual cravings for specific foods are extremely common but also specific to individuals and can be called “Trigger Foods”. Identifying them for individuals enables behavioral strategies to anticipate and prevent cravings from resulting in binge eating to take hold. Although the underlying causes of food cravings remain poorly understood, there have been a number of theories concerning their origin. The foods most commonly identified as craved are high in fat and carbohydrate, for example, chocolate, desserts and salty snacks (2).

1. Benton D, Young HA. A meta-analysis of the relationship between brain dopamine receptors and obesity: a matter of changes in behavior rather than food addiction? *Int J Obes (Lond)*. 2016;40 Suppl 1:S12-21.
2. Gilhooly CH, Das SK, Golden JK, McCrory MA, Dallal GE, Saltzman E, Kramer FM, Roberts SB. Food cravings and energy regulation: the characteristics of craved foods and their relationship with eating behaviors and weight change during 6 months of dietary energy restriction. *Int J Obes (Lond)*. 2007 ;31:1849-58.