

Pure Facts

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Junk Food Addiction

A common link between obesity and addiction

Rats that were offered a diet of unlimited processed junk food quickly developed an addiction, and required increasingly more of it to satisfy the pleasure centers of their brain. This was the finding of a study from the Scripps Research Institute in Jupiter, FL. It was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience.



One group was given unlimited access to fatty, sweetened processed foods purchased at a local supermarket, while the control group received a standard diet of nutrient-rich chow. The rats fed the junk food quickly developed a taste for it, compulsively eating large amounts, and they soon became obese.

After consuming the junk food for only 5 days the researchers found that those rats showed a dramatic reduction of their brain's ability to experience pleasure. They needed to eat increasingly large amounts of the junk food in order for their brain to experience pleasure; this is a definition for addiction.

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The junk food industry blinks

Their so-called "Smart Choice" system has been exposed as the most recent PR gimmick.

A rating system that considers Froot Loops a good choice was bound to come crashing down. After receiving scathing criticism from Connecticut's attorney general, the Food and Drug Administration, and Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, the mega-industries behind this latest scheme have backed down. The coalition of companies announced in October that they would "voluntarily postpone active operations."

The sharpest criticism has been leveled at the extensive promotion of cereals. Not only do they target children in their unrelenting advertising, but with as much as 46% sugar (Quaker Cap'n Crunch with Crunchberries) and 48% (Kellogg's Marshmallow Froot Loops) they might be better classified as breakfast candy.

Cola Defense

As talk of a tax on soft drinks sends shivers down their collective spines, the cola giants are looking for ways to protect their bottom line. Coca-Cola's solution is to sell their drinks in mini cans of just 7.5 ounces for those who have trouble limiting their consumption. Coke is partnering with Pepsi, Kellogg and others in forming what they have dubbed the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation. Watch for this newest public relations invention to promote exercise as the solution to overweight Americas' ills.

Cola Generosity

A favorite way for industries to try to improve their image is to befriend a respected organization. The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) has accepted a gift of six figures from Coca-Cola to "to help fund nutritional education content on its website." This partnering has brought sharp criticism from nutrition experts and the public resignation of member doctors who charge that an organization that claims to promote public health has no business accepting money from Coke.

An AAFP spokesman defended the grant, saying, "We will move forward with this commitment together by providing educational materials on sweeteners and how to maintain a healthy, active lifestyle while still enjoying many of the foods and beverages consumers love."

The Feingold® Association of the United States, Inc., founded in 1976, is a non-profit organization whose purposes are to support its members in the implementation of the Feingold Program and to generate awareness of the potential role of foods and synthetic additives in behavioral, learning and health problems. The program is based on a diet eliminating synthetic colors, synthetic flavors, aspartame, and the preservatives BHA, BHT and TBHQ.

To test the level of addiction, both groups of rats were given access to the junk food and were subjected to a foot shock when they ate the unhealthy food. Those rats who had been eating lab chow soon stopped eating the junk food, but the addicted rats continued eating it even though they knew they would receive a shock.

The change in the pleasure centers of the brains of the addicted rats continued for weeks after the junk food had been taken away.

Feingold and dessert

This study appears to provide additional evidence for those who criticize the Feingold Diet for allowing sugary foods (although we encourage moderation). But while most people agree that these foods are not healthy, let's take a broader look.

In our parents' or grandparents' day obesity affected a small percent of people and was not common in children. What is being called "morbid obesity" today was so limited that people who were that much overweight were likely to work in circus side shows.

There are many differences between the food available in supermarkets today compared to what people used to eat, but there's nothing new about dessert. People who could afford them ate candies, cookies and rich desserts but those foods did not seem to have the same effect as today's versions. What's different? Perhaps it has something to do with the fake flavorings, the petroleum-based dyes and preservatives, the hidden MSG and all that high fructose corn syrup. What's more, people who crave junk foods -- blends of fat, sweeteners, additives and too much sodium -- are likely to be deficient in nutrients that might enable them to tolerate a natural dessert.

How the game is played

In the true tradition of the fox guarding the hen-house, the food giants are offering their newest solutions to the problem of childhood obesity.

The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation is the most recent creation to address the problem of childhood obesity. The members include: PepsiCo, Kellogg's, Nestle USA, General Mills, Coca-Cola, Mars, ConAgra Foods, the Food Marketing Institute, Grocery Manufacturers Association, American Dietetic Association Foundation, Girl Scouts of the USA, and the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition.

For a little more detail, the American Dietetic Association receives grants from the food giants and the Girl Scouts have recently teamed up with Dairy Queen to offer their Blizzard with the various cookies blended in. The Thin Mint cookie Blizzard not only has added yellow and green dye, but the large size contains a whopping 1,000 calories and 31 teaspoons of sugar, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

As for the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition, their members include: Campbell Soup, Coca-Cola, General Mills, Grocery Manufacturers Association, Hershey, J.M. Smuckers, Kellogg, Kraft, Mars, Sara Lee, Unilever, and the Wrigley Company.



Putting junk food companies in charge of reforming themselves has not worked very well.

In 2006 yet another solution was offered and named the Council of Better Business Bureau's Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. This was a voluntary, self-regulating effort that could only work if companies were willing to reduce the enormous amounts of money they gained as a result of advertising junk food to children.

But the November-December issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* published a study that found children's shows contain 76% more food commercials per hour than other networks. The majority of these commercials are for junk foods. The shows for older children contain fewer ads for cereals, but focus instead on fast food restaurants, sugary drinks and sweets.

A 2007 study from the University of Liverpool found that children who were exposed to extensive TV ads for junk foods ate twice as much of them as children who did not have this exposure. England has restricted such ads during the hours the children would be expected to be watching.

The sneaky food additive

Sugars and fats are not the only problem with junk food. The widespread use of MSG (monosodium glutamate) in processed foods has been shown to lead to excessive eating and weight gain. This "flavor enhancer" is often disguised under other names such as hydrolyzed protein, autolyzed yeast extract, and even "natural flavorings,"