

# Addicted to chocolate?

Self-confessed 'chocoholics' often report a lack of control over their cravings - they feel compelled to eat chocolate despite knowing it may have a negative impact on them. In this respect chocolate sounds very similar to any other addictions, but could it really be addictive?

## Chocolate and mood

A study published by The Scripps Research Institute in 2009 found the same molecular mechanisms that drive people into drug addiction are behind the compulsion to overeat. Furthermore, researchers at the University of Tampere in Finland believe chocolate addicts demonstrate classic traits of addiction which include cravings, irregular eating behaviour, more negative mood and higher anxiety.

This is interesting given chocolate's reputation as an anti-depressant. 'Chocoholics' themselves swear it creates an instant feeling of well-being, and that abstaining leads to withdrawal symptoms, the latter being the criteria for a true medical addiction.

There is no denying that when we eat chocolate, or any sweet and high fat foods, the mood boosting neurotransmitter, serotonin, is released into our system making us feel happier. However, as researchers at the University of Dundee found, when we become addicted to chocolate it causes negative psychological effects which create a cycle of addiction. For instance, chocolate may help relieve stress in the short term, but eating too much can actually cause stress, which in turn leads to cravings for pleasurable foods.

## Chocolate - the chemicals

Some believe the reason chocolate only affects some people may be due to the chemicals it contains and how the body reacts to these, yet none of these ingredients have been found to be particularly addictive except for caffeine.

Chocolate contains only a small amount of caffeine. You would have to eat a huge amount of it to cause a physiological addiction and these chemicals are also present in lots of other foods too. Broccoli also has the potential to become addictive, yet you never hear of 'broccoholism'. So it seems the mood-elevating effects of chocolate are self-regulated and only lead to physiological addiction in some cases.

## A chocolate culture

So if it's not a physical addiction, why is chocolate so hard to quit? Society has taught us that chocolate is 'naughty but nice' and should be eaten with restraint.

This suggests our 'addiction' is a social construct which may be inherited or a product of our environment.

Researchers at the University of Shippenberg in Pennsylvania believe if we are raised in a culture in which chocolate is revered then we will learn to love it. They discovered that although a sweet tooth was not uncommon in different cultures, the foods craved varied to satisfy this desire.

## An antidote to modern living

Perhaps the stress of modern living in which we are bombarded with advertising, an abundant choice of appealing, high calorie foods and an obsession with thinness make chocolate hard to resist. We turn to food for comfort and then feel bad, restricting our intake, which heightens our desire for chocolate.

## The symbolism behind chocolate

Television advertising, in particular has led chocolate to be associated with love and affection and chocolate is commonly given to loved ones as a gift. Some adverts also play on the fact that chocolate can create feelings of sexual arousal by focusing not only on the taste but also the texture, aroma and sensation of eating chocolate.

So perhaps it is the mixture of chocolate's sensory qualities, contents and nutrients, coupled with hormonal and mood changes, that make chocolate so irresistible!

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