

SUGAR ADDICTION

Experts agree: sugar might be as addictive as cocaine



It's legal, socially accepted, and lurking in everything we eat.

We reward children with it, over the holidays or for a job well done in school. And we reward ourselves with it — after a particularly stressful day or to celebrate a birthday or a special success. We add sugar to our coffee, bake it into our favourite treats, and spoon it over our breakfast. We love the sweet stuff. We crave it. But, are we addicted to it?

There's an increasing body of research that tells us sugar could be as addictive as some street drugs and have similar effects on the brain.

"Addiction is a strong word," says [Alan Greene, M.D.](#), a children's health and wellness expert and the author of books like "Raising Baby Green" and "Feeding Baby Green." "In medicine we use „addiction“ to describe a tragic situation where someone's brain chemistry has been altered to compel them to repeat a substance or activity despite harmful consequences. This is very different than the casual use of „addiction“ („I'm addicted to "Game of Thrones!"")."

"So, I'm serious when I say that evidence is mounting that too much added sugar could lead to true addiction," says Greene.

What is an addiction?

The link between sugar and addictive behaviour is tied to the fact that, when we eat sugar, opioids and dopamine are released.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is a [key part](#) of the “reward circuit” associated with addictive behaviour. When a certain behaviour causes an excess release of dopamine, you feel a pleasurable “high” that you are inclined to re-experience, and so repeat the behaviour. As you repeat that behaviour more and more, your brain adjusts to release less dopamine. The only way to feel the same “high” as before is to repeat the behaviour in increasing amounts and frequency. This is known as substance abuse.



“Research shows that sugar can be even more addicting than cocaine,” says Cassie Bjork, R.D., L.D., founder of [Healthy Simple Life](#). “Sugar activates the opiate receptors in our brain and affects the reward center, which leads to compulsive behaviour, despite the negative consequences like weight gain, headaches, hormone imbalances, and more.”

“Studies suggest that every time we eat sweets we are reinforcing those neuro pathways, causing the brain to become increasingly hardwired to crave sugar, building up a tolerance like any other drug,” she adds.

Indeed, research on rats from [Connecticut College](#) has shown that Oreo cookies activate more neurons in the brain’s pleasure center than cocaine does (and just like humans, the rats would eat the filling first). And a [2008 Princeton study](#) found that, under certain circumstances, not only could rats become dependent on sugar, but this dependency correlated with several aspects of addiction, including craving, bingeing, and withdrawal.

Researchers [in France agree](#) that the casual link between sugar and illegal drugs doesn’t just make for dramatic headlines. Not only is there truth to it, but they determined the reward experienced by the brain after consuming sugar are even “more rewarding and attractive” than the effects of cocaine.

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“Medical addiction changes brain chemistry to cause bingeing, craving, withdrawal symptoms, and sensitization,” says Greene. “Excess added sugar can do this too, through changes in the same pathways as addiction to amphetamines or alcohol. Sugar addiction could be an even harder habit to break, according to recent evidence about how added sugar affects our stress hormones.” Sugar is also much more prevalent, available, and socially acceptable than amphetamines or alcohol, and so harder to avoid.

But whether or not sugar is more addictive than cocaine, researchers and nutritionists are in agreement that yes, sugar has addictive properties, and we need to be getting less of it.

“The drug analogy is always a tough one because, unlike drugs, food is necessary for survival,” says Andy Bellatti, M.S., R.D., strategic director of [Dieticians for Professional Integrity](#). “That said, there is an increasing body of research demonstrating that sugar can stimulate the brain's reward processing center in a manner that mimics what we see with some recreational drugs. In certain individuals with certain predispositions, this could manifest as an addiction to sugary foods.”

What is added sugar?

The World Health Organization (WHO) [has been cautioning](#) people to reduce their intake of “free sugars” to less than 10 percent of daily calories since 1989, saying that doing so can lower your risk for being obese, overweight, or experiencing tooth decay. “Free sugars” include both the sugars naturally found in honey and fruit juice, and sugar added to food and drinks. On food labels, added sugars include words such as glucose, corn syrup, brown sugar, dextrose, maltose, and sucrose, as well as many others.

In 2015, they further suggested reducing free sugar intake to less than 5 percent of calories, about 6 teaspoons. Most of this comes from beverages, including **energy drinks, alcoholic drinks, soda, fruit drinks,** and **sweetened coffee** and **teas**. You can also find large quantities of added sugar in bread, salad dressing, granola bars, and even fat-free yogurt.

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