Evidence for 'food addiction' in humans

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Research to be presented at the upcoming annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior (SSIB), the foremost society for research into all aspects of eating and drinking behavior, suggests that people can become dependent on highly palatable foods and engage in a compulsive pattern of consumption, similar to the behaviors we observe in drug addicts and those with alcoholism.

Using a questionnaire originally developed by researchers at Yale University, a group of obese men and women were assessed according to the 7 symptoms recommended by the American Psychiatric Association to diagnose substance dependence (e.g., withdrawal, tolerance, continued use despite problems), with questions modified by replacing the word food for drugs within the questions. Based on their responses, individuals were classified as 'food addicts' or non-addicts, and then the two groups were compared in three areas relevant to conventional addiction disorders: clinical co-morbidities, psychological risk factors, and abnormal motivation for the addictive substance.

While 'food addicts' did not differ from non-addicts in their age or body weight (controlled for height), they displayed an increased prevalence of binge-eating disorder and depression, and more symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. They also were characterized by more impulsive personality traits, were more sensitive or responsive to the pleasurable properties of palatable foods, and were more likely to 'self-soothe' with food.

"These results strongly reinforce the view that food addiction is an

identifiable condition with clinical symptoms, and is characterized by a psycho-behavioral profile that is similar to conventional drug-abuse disorders," said Dr. Davis. "The results also deliver much needed human support for the growing evidence of sugar and fat addiction in experimental animal research," she added. "These findings advance our search for clinically relevant subtypes of obesity that may possess different biological and psychological vulnerabilities to environmental risk factors. This type of information will help us develop personalized treatment approaches for those who struggle with overeating and escalating weight gain."

Provided by Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior