Eating is addictive but sugar and fat are not like drugs, study says

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Study examines 'food addiction'

(Medical Xpress)—People can become addicted to eating for its own sake but not to consuming specific foods such as those high in sugar or fat, research suggests.

An international team of scientists, including researchers from Aberdeen, has found no strong evidence for people being addicted to the chemical substances in certain foods.

The brain does not respond to nutrients in the same way as it does to addictive drugs such as heroin or cocaine, the researchers say.

Instead, people can develop a psychological compulsion to eat, driven by

the positive feelings that the brain associates with eating.

This is a behavioural disorder and could be categorised alongside conditions such as gambling addiction, say scientists at the University of Edinburgh.

They add that the focus on tackling the problem of obesity should be moved from food itself towards the individual's relationship with eating.

The study, which examined the scientific evidence for food addiction as a substance-based addiction, is published in *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews.*

The researchers also say that the current classification of mental disorders, which does not permit a formal diagnosis of eating addiction, could be redrawn. However, more research would be needed to define a diagnosis, the scientists add.

The work was carried at the Universities of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Gothenburg, Essen, Utrecht and Santiago de Compostela.

The researchers are involved in the NeuroFAST consortium, which is an EU-funded project studying the neurobiology of eating behaviour, addiction and stress.

Dr John Menzies, Research Fellow in the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Integrative Physiology, said: "People try to find rational explanations for being over-weight and it is easy to blame food.

"Certain individuals do have an addictive-like relationship with particular foods and they can over-eat despite knowing the risks to their health. More avenues for treatment may open up if we think about this condition as a behavioural addiction rather than a substance-based

addiction."

Professor Suzanne Dickson, of the University of Gothenburg and co-ordinator of the NeuroFAST project, added: "There has been a major debate over whether sugar is addictive. There is currently very little evidence to support the idea that any ingredient, food item, additive or combination of ingredients has addictive properties."

Professor Julian Mercer of the University of Aberdeen, Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health, said "The concept of 'food addiction' has been widely and frequently reported in the media, and it would be easy to form the view that this provides an explanation for the weight problems that many people experience. However, most individuals with a weight problem, if this is how we are going to describe the more than 50% of the population who are either overweight or obese, put on weight rather slowly over periods of years or decades, and for these people it is almost certainly completely inappropriate to suggest that food addiction or eating addiction has any role to play"

More information: Johannes Hebebrand, Özgür Albayrak, Roger Adan, Jochen Antel, Carlos Dieguez, Johannes de Jong, Gareth Leng, John Menzies, Julian G. Mercer, Michelle Murphy, Geoffrey van der Plasse, Suzanne L. Dickson, "Eating addiction", rather than "food addiction", better captures addictive-like eating behavior, *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, Available online 6 September 2014, ISSN 0149-7634, dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2014.08.016.

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