

Food Addiction: A Bit More Information

Over 200 million people in the United States are overweight (67% of the population). About 100 million of them are obese (33%). **How many of these are food addicted?**

Dr. David Kessler – former Director of the Food and Drug Administration, Dean of Yale University Medical School, and author of *The End of Overeating* (2010) – reported a study of adults in a major metropolitan area in which half of the obese, a third of the overweight, and ten percent of ‘healthy sized’ eaters” tested positive for food addiction (NPR, 2011). He was clear that you cannot project from this study, but it does give us **a hypothesis to test: there are 100 million adults (33%) in the United State that are food addicted.**

How can you tell if someone is food addicted? Many assessment instruments are available. To identify “normal eaters” who are obese, “emotional eaters” with eating disorders, and food addicts with a chemical dependency, I suggest the short tests in my *Bariatric Surgery and Food Addiction* (2009). I also recommend the peer reviewed Yale Food Addiction Scale (Gerhardt et al, 2009).

Addiction to food, like alcoholism and other drug addictions, is a brain disorder, a chemical dependency on one or more specific foods and sometimes volume of all foods (asam.org). From my clinical experience with over 4000 late stage food addicts, **the most common food addictions are** to sugar, high fructose corn syrup and artificial sweeteners. Many become addicted to flour and other highly processed food because it turns so quickly into glucose in the blood when ingested. Other common addictive foods include high fat foods, salt, wheat and other grains. Some are addicted to high volumes of almost all foods.

The characteristics of food addiction are: physical craving, mental obsession, loss of control, tolerance, progression, withdrawal, biochemical denial and treatable. There can be many secondary problems caused by food addiction including: obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, joint dysfunction, depression, malnutrition, and some eating disorders. When these other diseases manifest along with food addiction and are not immediately life threatening, it is important to treat the chemical dependency on food as primary (Sheppard,1993).

Treatment for food as an addiction begins with complete abstinence from offending foods over which there is loss of control. As with all prescriptions, there are different levels of food abstinence. After early stage food addiction – i.e. middle, late and final stages of the disease – treatment is most effective in community with others also pursuing recovery. If addicted to high volume of all foods, some form of external portion control is needed. **After physical detoxification, it is important to address the mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of the disease** (Weldon, et al, 2007).

In some cases, especially for critical level food addicts, only a treatment which emphasizes the spiritual aspect of the disease works in the long term. Food addiction, like alcoholism and other drug addictions, is a chronic disease. The food-related 12 Step fellowships, faith-based groups and professionally led recovery groups working in a spiritual context can be helpful both in initial recovery and as effective support for recovery maintenance over time. They also can be quite cost effective. Good treatment often includes education about these options and help in learning to use them effectively. (oa.org, graysheet.org, FA at 781-321-9118, CEA-HOW at 562-342-9344, FAA at 561-967-3871, RFA 713-673-2848.)

Tens of thousands of food addicts have benefited from professional treatment and hundreds of thousands from free volunteer recovery fellowships. Those needing professional support for detoxification, education about food addiction, preparation for one of the seven food-related 12 Step fellowships, and support to work on deeper feelings and spiritual concerns, can find professional help now. Visit www.foodaddiction.com and www.foodaddictioninstitute.org for information on fellowships and resources.

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