

One Meal Closer to Freedom

A starter booklet | www.foodaddictioninstitute.org



Foodaddiction
INSTITUTE

People addicted to food need extensive support in order to recover from this condition. We hope you find this starter booklet helpful as you begin your journey in search of the unique combination of supports that are best for you.

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Food Addiction is like drug and alcohol addiction. Addiction means the body has become chemically dependent on one or more substances and excessively craves these substances. So, when we are talking about a specific food as being a substance of abuse, we are saying that a person's body has become dependent on or habituated to a particular food or eating behavior.

- ✓ The most common addictive foods are foods high in sugar, flour, fat, grains and salt or some combination of these, "highly palatable" foods.
- ✓ The most common addictive eating behaviors are bingeing, purging, and volume eating.

Food Addiction is characterized by seeking foods or engaging in food behaviors to which we are addicted, eating these foods, and repeating these behaviors compulsively. A person will have great difficulty controlling these urges despite harmful consequences. This is the nature of addiction. Over time, it will often take more quantity or increased frequency to satisfy cravings.

The information in this booklet shares what has helped other people addicted to food. The following is a list of big and small steps to address as you begin working seriously to achieve your recovery from Food Addiction. **By reading this pamphlet, you have already started your journey. It's important to remember to keep moving forward no matter how hard this is, and how many setbacks you may experience.**

1. Understand and accept these concepts:

- ❖ Food Addiction is a brain disease. Physical cravings and a mental obsession begin when you ingest certain foods over and over and/or repeat certain addictive behaviors.
- ❖ You are not at fault. You did not give yourself this condition.
- ❖ The behaviors associated with your eating are a result of having the disease of Food Addiction. You are you. You are not your addiction.
- ❖ You will always have a Food Addiction. You can arrest your Food Addiction, on a daily basis, by adopting a new way of eating and behaving with food coupled with a new way of thinking.
- ❖ You cannot deal with your Food Addiction alone. You need and deserve several kinds of support.



2. **Be honest:** Being truthful with yourself is key. Having a Food Addiction is isolating. To break out of your isolation, be open about your addiction with other safe and understanding people in your life. Joining a peer support community with other Food Addicts is one of the best ways to do this.

3. **Keep a food diary:** Begin writing down what you eat every day. Write it all down, even if you are overeating and bingeing. Compile what you eat and drink and your experiences when you do so. Take a look at these after a week or a month. Begin to note patterns, emotions, or situations you had before or after you ate, good or bad. (If you are female, take note of your monthly cycle.)



4. **Identify the foods triggering your addiction:** The following are common triggers: any type of highly palatable ultraprocessed foods engineered to have tasty combinations of excess sugar, fat, salt and carbohydrates (like chips, fast foods, breads, cookies, or crackers), processed drinks (sodas, coffee concoctions, or energy drinks), and sugar (pastries, candy, salad dressing, or anything that has sugar among the first four ingredients). (Note that sugar has been given over 150 different names.) Alcohol is also a form of sugar. It is important to recognize that people with an addiction to one or more foods may also be susceptible to an addiction to alcohol and other drugs.

Other triggers:

- Grains (many individuals find they need to abstain from many or all types of grains)
- Hand-to-mouth foods like nuts and seeds
- Excess protein or salt
- Sugar-free products with artificial sweeteners, such as like gum and diet soda
- Foods engineered to make you experience a heightened pleasurable mouth feel
- Anything you can't stop eating



To do: Using trial and error, begin removing from your diet all food substances that may be triggering your addiction. Doing so one at a time can help you be certain of what precisely is triggering you.

Special note: Salt is not dangerous and is important to humans. However, processed foods that have been engineered with excessive salt in combination with processed, often excessive fats can be triggering. Fats found in animal proteins are the least toxic fats. Butter is a safe form of dairy.

5. **Identify the behaviors triggering your addiction:** The following are common behaviors triggering Food Addiction: Bingeing, purging, grazing or continual snacking, and eating a high volume of any food.

Other behavioral triggers: eating with hands, licking the plate or bowl/fingers, weighing oneself constantly, going by a mirror and always looking at your body and critiquing your weight loss or gain, not eating, eating frequently within a small window of time (1-3 hours), undereating, frequently skimming the internet looking for the next diet or another way of eating (jumping from one Food Addiction program to another like a ball in a pinball machine, being part of multiple social media groups, joining and leaving them — like trying a keto group one day and switching to a vegan group the next).

To do: Begin noticing the behaviors that are fueling your mental obsession. These are part of your addiction. Begin removing these behaviors.

6. **Identify other possible triggers:**

- A. HALT stands for Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. Become aware of HALT throughout your day and seek to avoid getting too hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. Be extra careful when you notice one of these feelings.

- B. Many Food Addicts have codependency tendencies. One of the ways codependency manifests itself in recovery from Food Addiction is when a person doesn't ask for what he or she needs when it comes to food. For example, if you are not eating sugar or bread because it's a trigger for you, it's important to ask for a substitute when you go to someone's house or eat out. Work on feeling confident about telling others what you need when it comes to food without worrying about hurting their feelings.

- C. Trauma from adverse childhood experiences or post-traumatic stress disorder occur commonly in children and adults. Experiencing trauma through an intensely scary or dangerous event can aggravate Food Addiction. Be aware of how trauma affects your life and explore these topics with support.



7. **Clean out the kitchen:** After identifying your trigger foods, it's time to remove them from your kitchen. In the beginning, it's important to avoid being around your trigger foods. If you live with others, have a conversation with them about what you are doing and what you need. If there's a reason it is not possible to

remove trigger foods from your kitchen, seek to create a separate place for them or take them out of your line of sight. To the greatest extent possible, it's vital for you to eliminate your trigger foods from your home and work environments. It's possible this could change in later recovery.

- 8. What and how to eat:** After removing the trigger foods and behaviors, make a commitment to eating three meals a day or five smaller meals per day. Work with a dietician who understands Food Addiction or join a peer support group and use a food plan. To avoid making choices when you are hungry or stressed, write down tomorrow's food. Share what you intend to eat with someone else — a friend, mentor, sponsor, or online group — not for permission but for your own accountability. Be specific. Many Food Addicts have found that weighing and measuring their food is an excellent tool to ensure they're following their commitment, rather than just eyeballing it.

Special note: Only you will know which foods and food behaviors trigger your addiction. You can get support, but you are the only one who can determine that. Everyone is different. This means even if "it" is allowed on a food plan, but you still cannot eat "it" if "it" triggers you.

- 9. Grocery shopping:** Shop mainly on the perimeter of the grocery store, avoiding the aisles that are filled with trigger foods. *Note:* The grocery store is a volatile place for Food Addicts. Consider bringing an understanding friend along for added support. If you find grocery shopping too triggering, the modern convenience of ordering online for pickup or delivery can be helpful.



- 10. Withdrawal:** This will be different for each person depending how long you have been dealing with your addiction. Initial withdrawal can last from three to eight days. However, sometimes it can take months for the physical or mental craving for certain substances or behaviors to leave completely.

- ❖ Drink lots of water, get adequate sleep, break a sweat daily, go for walks, and try to avoid triggering events or places.
- ❖ Initially, you may need to go further to create an “intensive care unit” like environment for a few days in which you sleep, wear your bedroom slippers, don't go out, and even take sick days off work.
- ❖ Detox from addictive substances in food is a real thing. If you “must” work, do your best to clear your calendar so you can do as little as possible for a few days.

- 11. Slips:** This means you pick up a trigger food and put it in your mouth. You can easily make a mistake and not know sugar is in something or accidentally put something on your plate that is on the list of foods you can't eat. However, a slip (a conscious slip) is when you decide to eat something you know is triggering. It's important to know the difference: “I put something in my

body that is not ok,” or “I did not know” (mistakes) vs. a slip: a conscious choice to eat a trigger food.

You can also have a hijacking experience when you do not realize you are picking up addictive foods and putting them in your mouth until after you have done it. Your brain can be so inflamed by the addiction there is no space between your thought of eating and the act of eating. The compulsion to eat may be *that* powerful.

To do: Begin to recognize if you have “slips” and be honest with yourself about what they are: conscious choices, not mistakes?

12. **Phone:** Picking up the phone and calling before you eat will distract you and will also give you an opportunity to connect with others. It would be great if you found a few other Food Addicts with whom to exchange mutual support. Addiction is strong, and especially in the beginning, using your phone to reach out for support can be a great way to stay away from active addiction.
13. **Writing:** Buy a new journal and begin writing about your experience. Go beyond just noticing what you eat and your triggers. When you stop engaging in your addiction, many feelings and emotions come up. Writing can help alleviate how you feel and help to clear your mind. And you can track your progress.



14. Meditation: Begin using a meditation protocol to support you in this process. A variety of apps and websites show how to start and what to do. To begin, you can set a time, preferably in the morning, to start your daily meditation practice. It can be as little as five minutes a day to start. Sit quietly with your hands folded in your lap and with your feet touching the ground. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Find a phrase to bring you calmness and one you can repeat to yourself. Notice negative thoughts, observe them, and focus on letting those thoughts go. You can read something spiritual and meditate on what you read, and you can also use this time to write. The goal is to begin consistently to set aside time for quiet reflection. You are changing your life and recovering from an addiction. This time will support that process. Try to build your morning meditation to 30 minutes a day. As you explore how to meditate, be willing to try some of the suggestions you discover.

15. **Trial and error:** As you are starting on your journey, take a trial and error approach. Avoid shame or negative self-judgment. You are learning about what works and what does not work. It’s important to accept what you are learning.

16. **Visit and possibly join a peer support group.** With the help of the group or extensive one-on-one work with an individual who has been



successful, you may be able to make an in-depth assessment as you learn more about the sorts of things you are trying to do from a trial and error perspective.



17. Going to restaurants: It's important to ask for what you need at a restaurant. If the waitstaff is knowledgeable, they can help identify foods from the menu to serve your needs. If you are sugar free, grain free, or some other combination, look at the menu online and consider calling ahead to ask for the assistance of the chef.

Here are some more restaurant tips:

- ❖ You can begin your order by saying “I eat no grain or sugar” or by saying what you personally don't eat. You can say you have an allergy or “I am following a medical food plan.” Restaurants are used to getting special orders from their patrons.
- ❖ When the food comes, if it has something you asked to avoid, remind the waitstaff and ask for a new dish as you ordered.
- ❖ Order a salad with oil and vinegar dressing on the side. Ordering your protein plain on its own separate plate often works.
- ❖ Go to restaurants with a salad bar from which to choose your own selections. Some restaurants will even sauté in garlic and oil your chosen veggies from the salad bar for you to have cooked vegetables. If it is not a busy time for the kitchen, ask.
- ❖ Remember the restaurant wants return business. Knowing what we want creates potential future meals for them to serve.
- ❖ Sending thanks to the chef and tipping well those who assist you also have favorable outcomes.

Staying on track

What you are seeking is the kind of mindful attention to your eating that allows some freedom from your addiction. The act of weighing and measuring, writing your food down, the structure of your eating (what and when), the agreements you are making, and the truths you are accepting are positive steps on this journey.

Other things to consider:

- Write down your goals and stick to them one meal at a time and one day at a time.

- It's easy to make exceptions, but doing so usually gets you back into the cycle of active addiction.
- After going through withdrawal, complete abstinence from trigger foods is easier than moderation. Once you get abstinent from your trigger foods, it's important to never pick them up again, one day at a time.
- If you have eliminated your trigger foods and you still can't stop eating, look at what may be causing this. You may be ingesting hidden sugars. Make sure to read labels carefully. And keep asking yourself, "Could I be eating additional trigger foods?"
- The most common additional abstinence that many people find they need is from grain products (flour, whole grains, and any items made from flour or whole grains.) These are sugar's "cousins." That is, the body turns them into sugars.
- To prevent returning to the use of foods that trigger you, it is best to have a relapse prevention plan. Be aware of the signs of relapse in your behavior and actions and implement your relapse prevention plan as soon as you notice yourself thinking or acting in a way that may lead you to relapse. It's important to remember that the process of relapse is initiated when we are not doing the things that keep us from using the food substances that trigger us.
- You may also need additional support.

Getting Support

This is a lifelong endeavor. For example, due to aging, hormone changes, or medical conditions, you may need to make refinements in your food plan. It may be difficult to recognize what foods might have become new personal triggers and how to go about abstaining from them. Rather than trying to do it on their own, many have found assistance of some kind from others to be helpful.

Large categories of support are:

- ❖ Peer support groups, particularly food-oriented 12 Step groups, and peer-led Food Addiction groups organized by providers. (Foodaddictioninstitute.org lists 33 of them.) Many have "sponsors" – people who have been successfully abstinent and act as personal coaches on a voluntary basis.
- ❖ You can also start a peer support community to support you and others in your own community. Some of the many Food Addicts in your local community may be friends, coworkers, or family members. Begin by talking to them about Food Addiction and share the institute's resources with them.

- ❖ Professional support of some kind may be provided by a physician, a nurse, a dietitian, a Food Addiction counselor or coach, a recovery coach, an ongoing treatment program, a treatment facility or a health coach.

Sometimes we may need to enlist the support of a combination of these categories.



The goal in Food Addiction recovery is for people who have been struggling to be free from food cravings and to create a state of mind and body free from obsession with food. *This is not a process of deprivation.*

Creating a meaningful and purpose-driven life and learning to use physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual practices to remain free from trigger and binge foods and behaviors can lead to relief, renewal, and freedom.

We hope these suggestions prove useful to you. Remember, daily positive actions can sustain and enhance recovery.

For more information on Food Addiction, resources, how to get help, and how to get involved, visit: <https://foodaddictioninstitute.org/>

About the authors: The Food Addiction Institute has a number of Board members, and international partners and practitioners in the field of Food Addiction who have contributed to the creation of this booklet. It is a compilation of their suggestions and draws from their many and varied experiences. Many have struggled with Food Addiction themselves. All have been successful in treating, caring for and/or supporting individuals struggling with Food Addiction.

The suggestions in this booklet may or may not work for given individuals. That is why we have repeatedly emphasized trial and error as the approach to take in searching for what fits you, uniquely, and what might best support your particular path to recovery. It has been written to support those getting started with managing their food dependency challenges.

The primary editor and creator of this document was Elsie Khamis, operations officer. She interviewed a number of individuals in the institute's network and synthesized their

recommendations. Other major contributors were Mark Cheren EdD , Cynthia Myers-Morrison, EdD, and David Avram Wolfe MS, RD, CNSC, LDN, FAC.

The Food Addiction Institute, founded in 2005, is an independent, nonprofit organization whose mission is to support the recovery of all Food Addicts. We advocate acceptance of Food Addiction as a disease of substance abuse and the availability of effective solutions. To accomplish our mission FAI works towards the following:

- ❖ Supply resources for those who may be Food Addicted.
- ❖ Provide public and professional education about Food Addiction as a treatable chemical dependency. Audiences include the general public, physicians, dietitians, therapists, counselors and other allied health professionals, nationally and internationally.
- ❖ Help identify and expand knowledge about Food Addiction.
- ❖ Create a forum for the development and dissemination of innovative and effective public health strategies related to the prevention, mitigation and treatment of Food Addiction.
- ❖ Offer information about promising new practices for the treatment of Food Addiction.