

How to Deal With Junk Food Withdrawal

By Kirk Moore, M.D.

Human nature seems inevitably attracted to things that are not necessarily good for us. Addictions thrive in doing what feels good, eating what tastes good, and triggering as many stimulating pleasure pulses to our brain as possible. In fact, the biochemical process of addiction works in much the same way for food intake as it does for drug intake, or in instances of any other physical and mental addiction. The body literally becomes addicted to a food substance because of the chemicals that are released in the brain after that substance is internalized. Before long, the body needs these chemicals to maintain normal functioning and going without them can cause a range of physical and psychological symptoms – from something as simple as cravings to symptoms as severe as depression and illness.

In these cases, it isn't solely a matter of ignoring cravings; rather, our biology works against us. For example, a high-fat diet does more than just taste good: fatty foods facilitate a process in which the body releases opioids, or chemicals in the brain, that make us feel less full. The more fatty foods a person ingests, the more the brain releases these chemicals, setting a process in motion that is strikingly similar to the effects of morphine on the human endocrine and central nervous systems.

So if our biology works against us, how do we armor up against it? For many who feel like food addictions and cravings are a losing battle, and who suffer particularly from junk food withdrawal, how do they change their physical dependency into a healthier cycle? According to Kathleen DesMaisons, PhD, author of *The Sugar Addict's Total Recovery Programme*, the most important step is the one that takes place in your own awareness of the situation.

“Sugar evokes a brain chemical called beta endorphin, the same chemical affected by morphine and heroin. The sugar creates a wonderful feeling of euphoria and wellbeing, but when it wears off, you feel edgy, irritable and cranky – this is actual withdrawal. If you use the drug [sugar] again, it relieves the symptoms, so you get caught in a cycle of needing it. People need to understand that it is not an issue of a weak will or lack of moral character. It is biochemical and, treated properly, you can heal. Addiction is an issue of isolation, so learning that you are not alone, that you can get support, is a huge part of starting that healing process.”

—Kathleen DesMaisons, PhD

Here, DeMaisons has outlined the first step to dealing with junk food withdrawal, and that is to understand it for what it really is: withdrawal from addiction. It's a complicated process, both physically and emotionally, and one that requires you to take care of yourself as it is happening.

You're probably asking, *so how do I do that?* The answer to that question is the same answer that would be given to anyone suffering from an addiction. The answer involves not only a change of mentality, but also a change of lifestyle and a change of self-awareness.

Below is a list to guide you as you begin the process:

1. Accept the truth

Once you make a conscious choice to quit blaming yourself or to quit feeling like a failure, you'll have the clarity of thought and purpose to set you on the right path. Mistakes will happen. You will "fall off the wagon". But don't let these binges keep you from your ultimate purpose, which is to break your addiction to junk food for good.

2. Ignore the negative influence in your life

One of the worst parts of trying to change your habits for the better is the inevitable naysayer – that person who laughs at your attempts, tells you that it can't be done, and tempts you with what you are trying to give up. This person might be a spouse or a child who doesn't understand the physical and emotional issues you are dealing with in relation to your junk food cravings and withdrawal, or a friend who deals with those same issues and doesn't want to face them himself or herself. While it might be impossible to completely rid your life of negative influences and people who will not support you, it is possible to remove yourself from these situations temporarily until you have gained a better outlook. If a friend or spouse constantly brings junk food around at a certain time, ask them to bring a healthier alternative. If someone arranges dining out at a restaurant that makes the best hamburgers and fries in the business, ask to go to another restaurant that has healthier alternatives. A small amount of compromise can go a long way in situations like this, and the end result might be that you become a better influence on them, rather than the other way around.

3. Find a support system

It's much easier to deal with temptation and negative influence when you have a support system to turn to when you feel particularly vulnerable or when you feel as if your willpower is down (although remember – it's not always a question of adequate willpower!). This support system could be a personal trainer, a friend who is on your same journey, a weight-loss group or food addictions recovery group, or even an Internet forum that discusses the topic of dealing with junk food addictions and withdrawal.

4. Take it slowly

One of the biggest mistakes people make when trying to deal with junk food withdrawal or with changing their diets is that they adopt an all-or-nothing plan. Many attempt to go from eating a lot of junk food, or foods high in sugar and fat, to eating none of these foods at all. This creates a shock on the system, similar to that created when a nicotine or heroine addict decides to quit “cold turkey”. Your body will protest, sending out symptoms of lethargy, depression, shakiness, headaches and nausea. This results in an even greater *need* to intake the foods that your body knows will cause the symptoms to abate. The cravings become unbearable and your mind will play tricks on you, telling you that you don’t have the willpower to do this. This cycle tends to create even worse habits than junk food addiction – habits like binge eating and bulimia.

The trick is to take it slowly. Start cutting out a little junk food this week, then a little more next week. On that next trip to the store, replace one item of junk food that you typically buy with a healthier alternative – maybe baked chips in place of fried ones. This gradual process will begin to morph into a routine for you, and not only will your junk food withdrawal symptoms lessen as time goes on, but you will begin to form a new way of living, a new way of eating, and a new mentality about what tastes good to you and what doesn’t.

5. Find healthier ways to send pleasure signals to the brain

Food and other substances are just a few of many ways to change the chemistry of the brain. Granted – food is often the most readily available. Once you begin to adopt a change in lifestyle and behavior, you will find other ways to relieve a stressful day, or calm your nerves in a difficult situation (what emotional eaters tend to do with junk food). Exercise is one of the key ways to do this, as the endorphins and chemicals released during and after exercise have just as powerful effect as food or drug intake – and sometimes more. You will be able to enjoy the process of your brain’s release of “feel good” chemicals without the guilt, as well as watch as your body begins to tone and fit the vision you’ve always had of your perfect self. This is why people who get into an exercise routine become almost obsessed with it – it begins to feel good and studies have shown that exercise is one of the best cures for depression possible. You don’t have to give up the effects of those pleasure signals to the brain; you only have to change the method whereby you release them.

If you follow these steps, you’re going to find that junk food withdrawal is not nearly as difficult as it’s always been for you. This is not some secret formula – this is scientific research. The more you know about your body, your mind, and the way

the two interact with each other, the easier it will be to start on the road to living guilt free and without food addictions.