



## Junk-Food Habits

It's hard to know where it all started. No doubt our pre-historic ancestors had their favourites when it came to food; and it is quite likely that they would have acquired a taste for certain delicacies when it came to nibbling on the left-overs. All humans, perhaps living creatures in general, develop preferences and, given the choice, will opt for the most satisfying.

This is where junk food comes into its own, that and the convenience of being instantly available. So it might cost a bit more, but it saves on preparation, cooking, AND it tastes good! The fact that it is detrimental to our health is not of major concern, because we only have it once in a while. Unfortunately, the "once" becomes twice then, before we realise, an increasing percentage of our main meals comprise take-aways and snack food.

The chain reaction has begun. Balanced meals have given way to party food. Hunger-buster carbs make up the bulk, fats add to the flavour, spices give it zing and the humble veggie, if present at all, is reduced to a few coloured specks in the fried rice. Washed down with the soda that often comes with the meal-deal, the problem is compounded by yet more incidental chemicals. And they are present for one reason only – to make us want more!

Pooh-pooh the suggestion, if you like, but think about it. Try to resist opening the packet of potato chips you nibble while reading, or watching TV and see how you feel. Serve plain cookies instead of cream cakes at your coffee morning and check out the looks on the faces of your guests. The reason for the disappointment is very likely caused by a feeling of deprivation and the first signs of withdrawal symptoms.

If I'm wrong, cutting out one, more, or all junk-food items should have no ill-effects. Simple hunger ought to be satisfied by an appropriate amount of wholesome food. Ignoring the pastry-display in the bakers, or the snack-food shelves in the supermarket shouldn't be a problem, not when there are fruit and vegetables on hand. And the aroma of pizza and flame-grilled burgers on the breeze would no way be responsible for a sudden detour downwind.

## One Man's Poison

Whether you agree with my fears or not, go with me for a bit and see if my experiences with food addiction are similar to yours. In my early twenties, I lived and worked two doors down from a candy store and I'd pop in once in a while for a bag of sweets. However, what began as an occasional treat evolved into a daily necessity. It progressed to the sad point where I was ordering my favourites by the jar! My teeth suffered and it probably did no good for my general health, but I was hooked on the taste. I loved the combination of sugar and different flavours. Did they use artificial additives in those days? I don't know, but I would imagine so.

Later in life I was less into sweet things – I graduated to savoury. Oops! Sucked in again, probably more so. A quarter of the weekly shopping trolley was taken up with bags of potato chips, snack biscuits, salted nuts and spicy noodle mixes. I wasn't concerned over getting through at least a box of barbecue shapes a night. I did develop a few fatty spots around the eyes, but I was never Prince Charming, even in my heyday; and I did a pretty physical job, so my weight didn't increase. Only after taking a vacation did I notice a really adverse effect – my pants didn't fit and I had to go to the next size up.

I tried to ween myself off, initially by going cold turkey. I was miserable and cranky. I couldn't enjoy my favourite TV programs without something to nibble. Meals I used to like seemed bland and dissatisfying, and there was nothing to look forward to afterwards as compensation. Less than two days into my abstinence I was feeling physically uncomfortable, fragile, sick even.

Withdrawal had kicked in. If I needed proof at all, it arrived the instant I dropped off the wagon

and began ploughing into a bag of potato chips. The extreme relief of feeling human again was just what the Doctor should have ordered! Some men cannot live by bread alone!

That was my excuse. I didn't need the snacks to survive, but my body and mind had become so used to them that they couldn't do without those tantalising extras. Unfortunately, recognising the problem and finding a way to fix it was destined to take much longer than I could imagine.

I won't try to kid you – the road to healthy living isn't an easy one, but it will be worthwhile if you can stick to it. The place I started looking for a solution was in my daily routine. I didn't eat while working, only during breaks and then just to recharge the batteries. The problem time was evenings and weekends when I was trying to relax. Junk-food seemed to help. The habit progressed from a few snacks while watching prime-time TV, to getting through a large bag over a four-hour period. It even extended to a wine and some nibbles immediately after arriving home from work. Weekends became a junk-food marathon. Before long, actual meals were less-satisfying than the tasty garbage and were sometimes skipped altogether. The only ones that could hold their own in this fatty, health-destroying environment were loaded with all those yummy additives that were now a necessity.

It appeared that spare time was my worst enemy. If I could figure out why I needed certain foods at specific times, I might be able to substitute healthy alternatives and eventually cut out some grazing sessions altogether. Almost as bad was the association trap. Cheese and wine, beer and pretzels, peaches and cream. Why did they go so well together? And which activities or entertainment never seemed to be the same without them? An answer might lead to a way of severing the partnership.

The after-work nibbles should have been the easiest to fix. The reason for wanting them seemed obvious – hunger. I was ready for a meal, but had to shower before preparing and cooking it. I also needed a few minutes to sit and unwind first. There was where the chain began – a glass of red to help with the relaxation, a few snacks to accompany the wine and keep the hunger at bay, plus a bit of informative entertainment courtesy of an early news broadcast. Any two went well together and were enhanced by the third. However, one on its own just didn't quite hit the spot any more.

### **The Wonder Cure**

Put in simpler terms, it was a vicious circle that looked impossible to break. Surprisingly, it wasn't, because it all revolved around two motivating factors – I was tired and hungry. So, I switched on the news, sat and poured just half a glass of wine, but left the snacks in the cupboard, telling myself that I wouldn't get any food until the evening meal. Needless to say, the wine didn't last long, the news failed to hold my attention, I was in and out of the shower pretty quick smart, and tea was served earlier than usual. And it seemed tastier somehow.

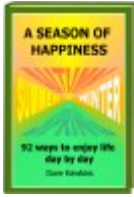
Extending the small success into the rest of the evening was much harder, but recognising the links helped. By keeping a flask of water handy and pouring the odd glass, not only cut down on the alcohol consumption, but, because I declined to eat anything while drinking it, I had introduced an inert, non-habit-forming element which had no pre-existing associations.

The really important discovery didn't dawn immediately, and had someone told me about it I'd have said they were dreaming. It's all in the power of good old H<sub>2</sub>O. Not only does water keep us alive, it also cleanses, both the body and the palate. The more I drank of the stuff, the better my sense of taste became. I was able to detect underlying flavours in the junk-food, many quite unpleasant. Burgers, once juicy and mouth-watering seemed greasy and had more-than-a-hint of very old mutton. I could tell if the French fries were cut from potatoes past their use-by date and cooked in oil that was overdue for changing. Even my favourite snack biscuits and chips didn't seem a patch on those I had always enjoyed.

In fact, I was forced to the conclusion that the food I cooked myself was streets ahead of the junk stuff. It tasted better and, because I made it myself, I knew what went into it. The healthy alternative was actually there all the time. It had merely lost flavour for a while.

**Next issue: That Certain Feeling – our inner-self is talking to us.**

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