

# One in Eight Adults Over 50 Are Addicted to Junk Food

By Lynn C. Allison

A University of Michigan survey found that one in eight Americans over the age of 50 showed signs of addiction to highly processed foods. And the percentage is much higher among women than in men, especially women in their 50s and 60s. It was also higher in older adults who say they are overweight, lonely, or in poor physical or mental health.

“The word addiction may seem strong when it comes to food, but research has shown that our brains respond as strongly to highly processed foods, especially those highest in sugar, simple starches and fat, as they do to tobacco, alcohol, and other addictive substances,” says Ashley Gearhardt, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, who developed the standardized questionnaire used in the poll.

“Junk food cravings represent a major public health hazard,” notes [Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D.](#), a board-certified internist, and co-author of “The Complete Guide to Beating Sugar Addiction!”

“Sugar is a major contributor to heart attacks, stroke, cancer, and diabetes. These are the major causes of death in the U.S.,” he explains. A big part of the problem is that ultra-processed foods such as sweets, salty snacks, sugary drinks, and fast foods are more rewarding than natural foods such as fruits, veggies, and lean meats. “Older Americans

have been increasing their intake of these ultra-processed foods, likely because they are cheap, convenient, and palatable,” adds Teitelbaum.

Amy Shah, M.D, author of “I’m So Effing Hungry: Why We Crave What We Crave — and What to Do About It,” points out that the ultra-processed foods 60 percent of Americans consume are loaded with salt, sugar, fats, and oils as well as additives designed to trigger intense pleasure responses.

The University of Michigan survey found that many people reported experiencing signs of addiction in their intake of ultra-processed foods, which makes eating healthier more challenging.

“In this study of adults ages 50 to 80, the most common signs of addiction were intense cravings, inability to cut down intake despite a desire to do so, and signs of withdrawal,” says Gearhardt, adding that a recent study found addiction to these foods leads to poor mental and physical health along with a whopping 600 percent co-occurrence with Type 2 diabetes.

## How to Beat Cravings and Junk Food Addiction

Teitelbaum tells *Health Radar* that 31 percent of Americans suffer from severe fatigue and reach for sweets for a quick energy boost.

“But unfortunately, sugar is an energy loan shark,” he says. “It’s better to get healthy energy by

taking a good multivitamin high in B-complex vitamins and improving the quality of your sleep.”

The answer to controlling cravings and addiction to junk food is to reconnect with minimally processed foods that you like, according to Gearhardt. “Make these foods the majority of your diet,” she says. “Generally, people like fruit. Start replacing some of the ultra-processed snacks in your diet with the fruit you enjoy. Also make sure you are getting enough protein such as lower fat cheese, plain Greek yogurt, and chicken breast to help you feel more satisfied and less vulnerable to ultra-processed food cravings.”

Eating regular meals can assist when you are reestablishing good eating habits. Three meals a day with one or two snacks can help you stay satisfied — becoming really hungry can set you up to fail, says Gearhardt.

Canned and frozen fruit are good, less expensive options if budgetary restraints keep you from eating healthier, fresh fare.

“Keep an eye out and read labels because some of these products have lots of additives, especially added sugar,” she notes. “Look for items like frozen berries, canned black beans, frozen cauliflower, and even canned chicken breast that can help you eat real food without breaking the bank. This isn’t easy work because there’s so much stacked against us in this food environment — but it is possible!” □