

Why Can't We Stop Eating Certain Foods?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Ultraprocessed foods are designed to melt in your mouth and bypass the need for chewing, which blocks your brain's ability to register fullness and drives you to overeat
- › Food companies use sound, smell, appearance, and packaging to stimulate your senses and condition your brain to crave their products through a marketing tactic called sonic branding
- › Snack products are marketed to dominate your day — from breakfast shakes to bedtime treats — fueling constant grazing that rewires your brain and leads to compulsive eating
- › Seemingly “healthy” snack foods like veggie straws and protein bars are loaded with empty calories that trick you into thinking you're making better choices, when in fact they disrupt hunger and satisfaction cues
- › These foods trigger the same dopamine-driven reward pathways in the brain as addictive substances like alcohol and nicotine, which explains why it's so hard to stop eating them — even when you know they're harming your health

Have you ever noticed how, when you open a bag of chips and start eating it, you somewhat can't help but finish it, down to the last crumb? Even if your mind is telling you to stop, your hands keep reaching down as you anticipate every crunch. It's like an addiction — and you're not to blame.

A BBC documentary investigates the strategic engineering of ultraprocessed food, and how they're designed to trap you by cleverly stimulating your senses — putting you in an endless cycle of cravings and overeating that ultimately leads to chronic diseases.¹

Obesity Is Not a 'Failure of Willpower' — It's the Result of a Shift in Our Food System

Dr. Chris van Tulleken, a doctor and scientist with the National Health Service (NHS) in the U.K., explores just how the global food system is drastically affecting people's health. Through interviews with different experts in the field of food manufacturing, he gives an eye-opening look at how food corporations manufacture and market products in ways that deliberately short-circuit your body's natural appetite controls.

- **Obesity rates in all age groups started rising at the same time** — Van Tulleken starts by disputing the belief that obesity is caused by a failure of willpower, providing data showing how obesity rates in different age groups rose simultaneously in the mid-1970s.

"[B]etween 1960 and 1975, there's a fairly steady percentage of obesity in the population. But in the mid-1970s, obesity starts going up in all of the groups simultaneously," he explained.

"Now, if you're saying willpower is responsible, what you're proposing is that all of these groups of people simultaneously lost moral responsibility. And that's not plausible. Something else happened to our food in the mid-1970s to make it irresistible to people."

- **So what changed during this time?** A separate BBC article describes how a "fork in the road" occurred in 1971. The 1970s were a period of terrible inflation — the cost of living rose, along with a demand for cheap food. Food historian Polly Russell explains:

*"On the one hand there's an increase in processed food, in supermarkets, in centralised food systems, in industrialised food, and all that goes with it. And on the other hand, there's also a growth in an interest in cooking as a leisure activity, in the origins of food, in food and seasonality, in a much more engaged relationship with food."*²

- **Another significant change happened — the fast food industry grew** — Restaurant chains like McDonald's were expanding; in fact, the quarter pounder was released in 1971. American portion sizes started increasing as well. On the other side of the world, instant ramen in a cup was born in Japan. It eventually reached U.S. shores and became known as Cup O' Noodles.³

But the biggest change that occurred after the 1970s — and continues to this day — is that ultraprocessed food manufacturing has gone beyond producing cost-efficient food — it has become a complex process that creates products designed to overload your senses so that you have no choice but to keep eating.

How Texture Tricks Your Brain Into Overeating

One particular trick that manufacturers use is playing around with textures — not just flavor or ingredients — to increase consumption and drive profits. This deeper manipulation works at the level of chewing, sensation, and brain signaling.

- **Snacks are intentionally designed to be crunchy and squishy** — John Ruff, a former executive from Kraft General Foods who spent four decades in the global food industry, explains that everything from a product's crunch to its squish is tested by trained sensory panels before it hits store shelves. Every bite is fine-tuned for maximum appeal — not through nutrition, but through feel, mouth sensation, and how fast you eat it.

"Companies spend a lot of time optimizing all aspects of their product — the flavor, the taste, the texture. People want their product to be as good, if not better than the competitor, so it will sell more," Ruff said.

- **Eating snacks with soft textures disrupts a key biological safeguard** — Some snacks are designed to be crunchy on the outside, while the inside is soft enough to melt in your mouth. This is intentional; since you're not chewing soft food as much, it short-circuits the normal satiety mechanisms you'll have if you were chewing food properly.

As a result, your body is bypassing a mechanism that signals fullness — it triggers you to keep eating. According to Professor Francis McGlone, a former lead neuroscientist at Unilever:

"Once we worked out that playing around with the texture of food — making it softer — tricks that normal satiety of fullness mechanism, clearly there's an opportunity there for some kind of scurrilous behavior in making food softer so that people will eat more and therefore you sell more of your product."

- **What's more, ultraprocessed foods are engineered to be consumed quickly** — This means your body has even less time to register satiety before you've eaten hundreds of calories.
- **The industry term for this is "vanishing caloric density"** — This refers to how certain puffy, light foods dissolve so quickly in your mouth that your brain doesn't even process them as calories. You don't feel full, so you eat more. Van Tulleken demonstrates this by biting into a common puffy snack that he says his kids love.

"You don't typically think of this as being a soft food because it's a bit crunchy. But actually after that initial crunch, you can just crush it with your tongue, right? It's got no resistance at all. But in terms of the calories per gram, it's got way more calories than even a very fatty burger."

And because these foods are usually packed with highly digestible carbohydrates and oils, they hit your bloodstream fast, spiking blood sugar and encouraging fat storage.

These textures aren't about convenience — they're a marketing weapon. The melt-in-your-mouth sensation is part of a deliberate effort to make foods that are hard to stop eating. That's how a handful of snacks turns into a finished bag before you even realize what happened.

Eating Is a Multisensory Experience, and Food Manufacturers Are Taking Advantage of It

Van Tulleken emphasizes that the real manipulation extends beyond taste and texture — it's about logos, colors, sounds, and even the tactile experience of handling the product.

- **Every bite is a multisensory event** — Prof. Barry Smith, a sensory consultant who's worked with major food companies, says that eating is never just about flavor. What your food looks like, how it smells, and how it feels in your hand matters.
- **Even the sound food makes when you bite into it is crucial** — "When you open a fizzy soda, you've got two noises. You've got the click and the tear. Sound engineers and manufacturers work really hard to get that sound just right. And that's sonic branding," Smith says.
- **Defining sonic branding** — To put it simply, sonic branding is a marketing strategy where sound — jingles, chimes, or music — is used to build emotional connection and memory with consumers. It creates brand identity. To illustrate, Smith recalls a conversation he had while working for Kellogg:

"[T]hey said, 'Ooh, what's sonic branding?' And I said, 'You invented this.' Most people will remember as children the experience of lifting a bowl to their ear. And what are they listening for? Snap, crackle, and pop. That's sonic branding at its best, and that's the original."

These strategies are beyond clever — they're deeply psychological. The more senses a product stimulates, the more likely you are to develop an emotional connection with it. That connection drives repeat purchases and builds brand loyalty, often without you

consciously realizing it. These signals bypass your logical thinking and aim straight at the parts of your brain that drive habit and craving.

Snack Foods Are Designed to Hijack Your Day — and Keep You Addicted

Have you ever noticed how certain processed foods are marketed to be consumed at a specific part of your day? For example, granola or oatmeal bars are marketed for on-the-go folks who want a quick breakfast before they start their day.

High-protein bars are designed to be eaten as a pick-me-up after a rigorous workout session. And if you're craving a snack in the middle of the day, "healthy" products like veggie straws are recommended — while they seem convenient, they're not healthy at all.

- **Ultraprocessed snacks compete for your "stomach share"** — Dr. Yanaina Chavez Ugalde from the University of Cambridge explains how modern food companies have shifted their strategy from mealtime nutrition to all-day consumption. Rather than just competing for your breakfast, lunch, or dinner, they aim to dominate your stomach share — the cumulative space in your day where food can be inserted. And their most profitable weapon in this battle? Snacking.
- **These snacks are filled with empty calories** — This means that while you get the energy, you don't get the fiber, protein, or micronutrients that keep your body functioning well. "Whereas before we would have had food, actual food, now we are marketed into believing that this is actually a healthy replacement."
- **Snacks are labeled "share-size," but the marketing knows full well you'll likely eat them alone** — The packaging says "family size," but the design cues, flavors, and textures are engineered to keep your hand in the bag until it's empty.

This constant grazing doesn't just affect your waistline — it changes your brain. The more you snack on these engineered products, the more your brain rewires itself to expect that stimulation. The result is a cycle of craving and consumption that's extremely hard to break.

- **Ultraprocessed foods are just as addictive as alcohol or cigarettes** — University of Michigan psychology professor Dr. Ashley Gearhardt, who specializes in the science of addiction, compares ultraprocessed foods to addictive substances like alcohol, nicotine, and cocaine.

"When we look at the sorts of foods that trigger those key diagnostic indicators of addiction, it's really clear what it's not. It's not minimally processed foods like fruit or vegetables or beans or lean meats like chicken breast. It's really processed foods. It's chocolate. It's ice cream. It's pizza. It's foods that don't exist in nature," she said.

When you consume junk foods, your brain lights up with **dopamine** — a chemical that plays a central role in craving and reinforcement. In normal eating patterns, dopamine helps you feel satisfied. But with ultraprocessed foods, the hit is so intense and so immediate that it overrides normal controls. This is why you keep eating even when you're full, even when you feel sick, and even when you've promised yourself to stop.

Read more about the addictive nature of ultraprocessed foods in "[What Foods Trigger the Greatest Cravings, Leading to Overeating?](#)"

How to Break Free from Ultraprocessed Food Addiction

The documentary closes with a statement from the Food and Drink Federation, the membership body for food and drink manufacturers in the U.K., saying that the government's Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition found "insufficient scientific evidence on the concept of 'ultraprocessed foods' for it to be used for dietary guidance or policy making, and that further research is needed."

They said they will only change their ingredients or processes once there's research showing that processing is a cause for concern. Clearly, they're turning a blind eye to the growing research that shows ultraprocessed foods are not only addictive, but also put you at higher risk of chronic diseases like obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.⁴

If you're caught in a cycle of eating unhealthy ultraprocessed foods but still can't seem to stop, you're not alone. Ultraprocessed foods are engineered to hijack your brain and trick your body, overriding your natural cues so you'll keep reaching for more. However, the solution isn't to shame yourself — it's to understand what's really going on so you will be able to reclaim control of your body. Here are strategies I recommend to help you reclaim control and heal from ultraprocessed food addiction:

- 1. Start by removing the foods that bypass your fullness signals** — I suggest you identify the worst offenders in your daily routine and replace them with real food that requires chewing. A crisp apple, carrots with grass fed cream cheese, or crunchy cucumber slices will give your brain time to register satisfaction.
- 2. Eat real meals instead of grazing all day** — Structure your day around three healthy meals with enough protein, healthy carbs, and saturated fat to sustain you. This grounds your energy, helps stabilize your blood sugar, and makes snacking less necessary.
- 3. Interrupt the marketing cycle with awareness and environment control** — You are being manipulated through sound, packaging, and brand familiarity. Keep processed foods out of your home. Even covering labels with plain paper or storing snack items in opaque containers can help break the visual feedback loop that makes you crave them. Many ultraprocessed foods are also highly marketed to children, so if you have kids, show them how food ads work so they grow up with awareness.
- 4. Track your progress** — I've found that the more you notice patterns, the easier it is to break them. Keep a simple journal for 10 days. Write down when you eat ultraprocessed food, what was happening around you, and how you felt afterward.

You'll start seeing patterns — maybe stress after work is your trigger, or late-night boredom. That kind of clarity builds self-efficacy — the belief that you can make changes because now you understand the why. This alone will lower the shame and increase your momentum toward real change.

Awareness is the first step toward regaining that control. When you understand the tools being used against you, you can take the first real step toward full autonomy over your food choices and overall health.

"If someone is watching this and they are struggling with their weight, with diet-related disease, I just want to reach out and grab them and go, 'This is not your fault. It is not you. It is the food,'" van Tulleken concludes.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Ultraprocessed Foods

Q: Why do I feel like I can't stop eating certain snack foods, even when I'm full?

A: Ultraprocessed foods are engineered to bypass your natural satiety mechanisms. Their soft, melt-in-your-mouth textures eliminate the need for chewing, which interrupts your body's ability to signal fullness. This design keeps you eating long after your body has had enough.

Q: What is "vanishing caloric density" and why does it matter?

A: Vanishing caloric density refers to foods that dissolve quickly in your mouth, like puffed snacks or crisps. Because they vanish on contact, your brain doesn't fully register the calories you've consumed. This makes you eat more without feeling satisfied, contributing to overeating and fat storage.

Q: How are my senses manipulated to make me crave these foods?

A: Food companies use multi-sensory marketing — including sounds, textures, smells, packaging, and even the "tear" of a wrapper — to stimulate your brain's reward system. Techniques like sonic branding create emotional memories around products, encouraging cravings before you even take a bite.

Q: Are "healthy" snacks like protein bars or veggie straws actually good for me?

A: Not really. Many of these products are marketed as healthy but are actually nutrient-poor and energy-dense. They often lack fiber and protein and are filled with processed oils and additives, which disrupt your body's hunger signals and promote chronic snacking.

Q: What's the best way to break free from my cravings for ultraprocessed foods?

A: Start by removing foods that bypass fullness cues, eat real meals instead of grazing, become aware of marketing manipulation, replace reward triggers with new habits, and track your eating patterns to identify and interrupt craving cycles. These steps rebuild your body's natural signals and help restore real control.

Sources and References

- ¹ [YouTube, BBC, Why can't we stop eating certain foods?, December 5, 2024](#)
- ^{2, 3} [BBC, 1971: The year that changed food forever?](#)
- ⁴ [Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America \(LHSFNA\), April 1, 2019](#)