The Cheesecake Made Me Do It

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Overeating junk food containing high amounts of fat and sugar is bad news for the brain. It turns out that binging on junk food negatively impacts the same biochemical reward system in the brain as crack or heroin. In this case cheesecake is whack, at least for mice.

To determine whether food binging has the same neurological affects as drug abuse, scientists at the Scripps Research Institute raided the local mini-mart for things like chips and Ding-Dongs, and then let groups of mice to gorge on as much of the junk food as the little critters wanted. Then, the researchers looked at the mice's behavior and brain chemistry. The researchers found that the mice's brains and their behavior mimicked that of drug addicts precisely.

Normally, a person's brain releases dopamine when something happens that is pleasurable--such as a massage--or helpful to survival--such as eating nutrient-rich food or being praised by an authority figure. Heavy drug use disrupts that reward system. When a person uses lots of cocaine for extended periods of time, the brain stops making and stops processing dopamine effectively. The consequences can be severely unpleasant. Not only will a person fail to find pleasure in things they used to enjoy, but they can actually experience physical and emotional distress--unless they gain access to lots of the substance they're addicted to.

Now, the Scripps researchers have learned that the very same brain chemistry changes that occur in the brains of a person addicted to heroin also occur in chronic ice-cream junkies.

"These findings confirm what we and many others have suspected," Kenny said, "that overconsumption of highly pleasurable food triggers addiction-like neuroadaptive responses in brain reward circuitries, driving the development of compulsive eating. Common

mechanisms may therefore underlie obesity and drug addiction.”

Perhaps this new research will change attitudes or quiet some of the controversy surrounding the notion that people can be addicted to food, or at the very least, that mice can be food-addicts. It should probably come as no surprise that the drug of choice for the furry little guys was cheese cake.

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