You might have a food addiction if you’re sneaking off to eat certain foods, driving out of your way to buy them, or feeling guilty about eating too much.

Mary Foushi lost 200 pounds after seeking help for food addiction.

Key Takeaways

- Food addiction is characterized by a compulsion to overeat foods people know are unhealthy for them.
- At least 5 percent of adults have food addictions that put their weight — and health — at risk.

Do you sneak certain foods, drive out of your way to buy them, or feel guilty about eating too much of them? If so, you might have a food addiction. In one study published in the journal PLoS One, five percent of participants were found to have a clinical food addiction.

Living With Food Addiction

But many more adults — possibly as many as half of all obese adults — may be living with the early stages of food addiction, said recovering food addict Mary Foushi, cofounder and Executive Director of ACORN, a program to help people overcome food dependency. Foushi lost 200 pounds during her 24 years of abstinence from the foods that trigger her addiction.

Foushi, now 61, says that she didn’t know she had a food addiction until she was 34. Before then, she cycled through yo-yo diets, losing as much as 100 pounds only to gain it back.

She also says she was addicted to eating large quantities of food such as “pastries, cakes, donuts, ice cream, crackers, bread, nut butters, pies, cookies, pasta with butter, deep-fried foods, potato chips —
but mostly sugary foods,” she says. “The first I heard about food addiction was when I went into a treatment center in 1986 that was 12-step based and worked with alcohol, drug, and food addiction,” she says.

One of the challenges for food addicts is finding a new way to eat when the people and society around you are still eating the foods that trigger you. Foushi says that in her experience, family and friends had good intentions but did not understand her addiction.

“They would often say, just try one bite [of a food that triggered her addiction],” she says. Still, she persevered, and with the help of 12-step programs remains healthy today.

**What Exactly Is Food Addiction?**

Food addiction is not yet recognized as a diagnosable addiction. In the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), the volume used to diagnose mental and behavioral health conditions, food addiction behaviors are included under binge eating. But debates about whether food addiction should be included as a substance abuse disorder are ongoing.

“The Food Addiction Institute has supported binge eating disorder and food addiction as a substance use disorder,” says food addiction counselor Phil Werdell, MA, director of the ACORN Food Addiction Institute in Sarasota, Fla. But for the moment, the nature of food addiction is hotly debated. One question is how best to differentiate between food addiction and binge eating. Other experts have raised the question of which food components are the most addictive. Sugar, salt, and fat tend to top the list of potentially addictive food components.

Currently, the Yale Food Addiction Scale is a tool that helps clinicians understand an individual’s relationship to food. The peer-reviewed scale asks about specific eating habits that could indicate addiction, such as eating to excess, going out of your way to buy specific foods, feeling guilty about overeating, experiencing withdrawal symptoms such as irritability or anxiety if you can’t eat these foods, feeling fatigued despite eating a lot, and continuing to eat certain foods even after experiencing negative consequences.

“Overeating in some degree may occur in many individuals; however, a proportion may develop an obsessive-compulsive relationship to certain foods,” explains food addiction researcher Pardis Pedram, MD, a doctoral student at Memorial University in Canada and lead author of the study published in PLoS One.

Pedram and colleagues surveyed 652 adults to assess the relationship between food addiction and obesity. They found a 5 percent prevalence of food addiction overall, but noted that food addiction was more likely among obese people. “The most common symptom of food addiction in our [group] was ‘persistent desire or repeated unsuccessful attempt to quit,’ ” says Pedram.

Screening people for signs of food addiction could be useful in situations such as bariatric surgery practices where post-surgery diet strategies should be tailored to each patient’s needs, points out Werdell, author of Bariatric Surgery and Food Addiction. Food addiction means a patient needs a different treatment strategy, most likely based in the 12-step approach of groups like Overeaters Anonymous or Food Addicts in Recovery, he says.
Making the Choice to Get Help
Ultimately, food addicts will have to make the decision about when and if to seek treatment. Abstinence from the addictive foods takes work, but it is possible.

“I would tell people that the main thing that they may need to do is take a look at the foods they are addicted to, get support in order to get off the addicted foods, and get support for the feelings and emotions that come up,” says Foushi, who went through a period of withdrawal symptoms as she began her abstinence program. Today, she is happily staying away from the foods she found addictive while advocating for broader awareness of food addiction.