

# The seductive quality of food is all in the brain ✓

By Jennifer Harper  
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Cheese — along with chocolate, sugar, pastries, meat and other delectables — may be as addictive as drugs, according to Dr. Neal Barnard, a physician who believes such goodies tickle the same part of the human brain vulnerable to alcohol, tobacco and heroin.

People crave that perfect filet mignon. They envision a stolen moment with a brownie or the pizza of their dreams.

"There's a reason why people call these things 'comfort foods.' They're getting an opiate when they eat them," Dr. Barnard said.

His research reveals a complex mealtime seduction that involves the pleasure-producing brain chemical, dopamine, released when humans are giddy with enjoyment — whether its brought on by romance or a chocolate doughnut.

The doughnuts — along with other typical offerings of a "foodie" culture — are easy to come by these days. Eaters get in

## Doctor says commonly craved items produce opiates

"food ruts," Dr. Barnard believes, and eventually crave the good feeling they get when one-on-one with a favorite dish.

He is not out to scold, though, and reveals his own weakness for hot peppers. The food itself is the culprit, he said.

"We're setting aside the blame. It's not gluttony, weak will or an 'oral' personality that keep some us tied to certain foods," Dr. Barnard said. "There's a biochemical reason why many of us feel we can't live without our daily meat, cheese or sugar fix."

Indeed, the nation has a taste for this luscious trio. According to industry statistics, the average American eats 235 pounds of chicken, beef, pork and turkey a year; 30 pounds of cheese and 145 pounds of sugar, corn syrup and honey. Americans also put away 12 pounds of chocolate annually.

This eating ethic contributes to a chubby country. More than three out of five of us are overweight, ac-

ording to statistics released by Harvard University on Wednesday, just a day after U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona labeled the obesity trend "the terror within."

Dr. Barnard, president of the D.C.-based research group Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine and an associate professor of medicine at George Washington University, is after the real cause of American food fixation.

He's followed the case of "Cynthia," who couldn't forego her nightly chocolate bar, taken like a medicine invariably between 8 and 9 p.m.

"The attraction to chocolate is not simply due to its taste and creamy texture. Chocolate hits the brain and causes habituation that is as real and physical as addiction to narcotics — albeit not so destructive," Dr. Barnard writes in his just-published book, "Breaking the Food Seduction."

He has zeroed in on cheese, not-

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— Dr. Neal Barnard

ing that casein, its major protein, gets converted into a "morphine-like opiate compounds, called casomorphins."

Though he has devised a three-week dietary program to help people "break out of craving cycles," Dr. Barnard embraces a bigger cause. He believes his theories will affect fast food lawsuits, such as the case against McDonald's last year that found one customer blaming

his obesity and diabetes on the restaurant chain.

"Until now, 'big food' has tried to defend itself from 'big tobacco'-like lawsuits by arguing that unhealthy foods, unlike cigarettes, are not addictive," Dr. Barnard observed.

"The industry has argued that customers who get suckered into high-fat meals — like cheeseburgers and shakes — have only themselves to blame for their health problems. But it's high time we stopped blaming ourselves and recognized there's a real physiological reason we feel inexplicably drawn to these foods."

The House Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law will review the finer points of the issue Thursday with a legislative hearing on H.R. 339, "The Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act."

The bill was introduced in January "to prevent frivolous lawsuits against the manufacturers, distributors, or sellers of food or non-alcoholic beverage products that comply with applicable statutory and regulatory requirements."