The Truth About Meat and Dairy Addiction

By Dale Lugenbehl

Often times someone will say that they would really like to be vegetarian or vegan, but when they eat that way they just don't feel well, "Something seems to be missing; I feel tired, nervous, and weak." They may think it is because they need animal protein in order to be healthy. This misperception seems confirmed for them when they go back to eating animal products and very quickly feel better again.(1) Before concluding, as many people do, that some people just need animal products in order to be healthy, we should look into this issue more deeply.

There seem to be four mechanisms at play in regard to a persistent desire for animal food products and not feeling well when no longer eating them.

First, the craving part can be partially explained by the fact that we are biologically programmed to seek out and respond to calorie dense foods, and fats are more than twice as calorie dense as carbohydrates or proteins. The strong appeal of fat was very useful to us for the many thousands of years when getting enough calories was a pressing daily issue for humans. Meat, as it turns out has a lot of fat in it—beef, for example, checks in at about 68% to 74% of calories from fat. Dr. Neal Barnard, President of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, states that "The taste for meat…or anything else with a lot of fat in it… may be due… to evolutionary pressures leading us to prefer high-calorie foods." (2)

Dr. Andrew Weil reports similarly that "Now, a study [of 134,000 people] published online on January 22, 2014, in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* finds [that] …the most 'addictive' foods were those high in fat, sugar and salt, as well as processed foods. These seem to trigger the brain's pleasure and reward centers through increases in the transmission of the feel-good chemical, dopamine." (3)

Secondly, in addition to large amounts of fat, meat and other animal products contain chemical opiates that cause dopamine to be released by the brain. (4) Dopamine is at the chemical center of all pleasurable experience.(5) Dr. Barnard notes that "When researchers use the drug naloxone to block opiate receptors in volunteers, meat loses some of its appeal [and that] blocking meat's opiate effect cut the appetite for ham by 10%...salami by 25%... and cut tuna consumption by nearly half." (6)

Psychologist James MacKillop, University of Georgia, found that "Modern neuroscience has helped us understand how substances like drugs and alcohol co-opt areas of the brain that evolved to release dopamine and create a sense of happiness or satisfaction," he said. "And now we realize that certain types of food also hijack these brain circuits and lay the foundation for compulsive eating habits that are similar to drug addiction." (7)

Not surprisingly, cheese, which is also extremely high in fat, is perhaps even more psychologically addicting than meat. Dr. Barnard states that… "Cheese's attraction is not mainly due to taste or smell, at least not a first… Like beer or cigarettes, cheese's taste can be off-putting at first. Its real lure may be hidden in its mother lode of opiates—dozens of them—whose effects have been surprising scientists in recent years. The smell and taste are secondary. Scientists speculate that, in the same way that people come to associate the taste of an alcoholic drink with the pleasant relaxation that soon follows, we associate the taste of cheese with what really counts, which is what is happening in our brains [due to the opiates in cheese that cause the brain to release dopamine, which makes us feel good]." (8)

Researchers believe that these naturally occurring opiates are there to provide a pleasant calming effect for the young calf, and also help the calf to bond with its mother. These opiates are concentrated by the cheese making process.(9) Dr. Barnard also observes that cheese contains an amphetamine-like chemical called phenylethylamine that is also found in chocolate and sausage. (10) Cheese, of course, is also extremely high in salt, and salt is another substance that the human body has evolved to seek out. Most people are already quite familiar with how difficult it can be to back away from salty food such as potato chips.

Third, in addition to high fat content, and dopamine stimulating opiates, Dr. Barnard reports that it has been discovered that "…meat stimulates a surprisingly strong release of insulin… In turn, insulin is involved in the release of dopamine [from the brain, and] …Dopamine… is the ultimate feel-good chemical turned on by every single drug of abuse—opiates, nicotine, cocaine, alcohol, amphetamines, and everything else." (11) Both beef and cheese cause a distinct and often surprising insulin spike. (12)

There is a good deal of research implicating insulin as having a significant drug effect. Diabetic patients have been known to abuse prescribed insulin to "compulsively [seek] the excitement and euphoria associated with a rapid lowering of his blood glucose concentration," and other individuals who were not diabetic have "injected insulin to 'get a kick.'" (13)

Another research study reports that "There appears to be a class of individuals who are not diabetic and inject insulin to induce euphoria…" (14)

A fourth factor related to some people having trouble letting go of animal foods has to do with the toxic load present in various foods. Dr. Joel Fuhrman's analysis is based on the insight that animal foods carry a particularly heavy load of toxins. When you "withdraw" from animal products, the body begins ridding itself of toxins and rebalancing itself. This detoxification process triggers symptoms similar to what are experienced when withdrawing from other toxic substances ("intoxicants") to which

the body has become *accustomed* such as alcohol, nicotine, or caffeine. Dr. Fuhrman points out that nicotine, heroin, or caffeine withdrawal effects can be stopped by a return to use of the original intoxicant.

"A diet heavily burdened with animal products places a toxic stress on the detoxification systems of the body. As with stopping caffeine, cigarettes, and heroin, many observe withdrawal symptoms for a short period, usually including fatigue, weakness, headaches or loose stools. In 95 percent of these cases, these symptoms resolve within [less than one and no more than] two weeks." (15) Unfortunately, "many people mistakenly assume these [withdrawal] symptoms to be due to some lack in the new diet… [and return to] their old way of eating—genuinely *feeling better* for it—and now insist that they *need* meat to thrive. .. People confuse *feeling* well with *getting* well, not realizing that sometimes you have to temporarily feel a little worse to really get well." (16)

All that is necessary is to be patient and allow the body time to make the adjustment. Not everyone who stops eating meat or dairy experiences withdrawal, but it does happen with some people. It is very useful to know about this possibility ahead of time and to be prepared for it.

Here is some additional good news: Dr. Barnard found that, both in his own studies, and those conducted by Dr. Dean Ornish at the University of California, it only takes the body about three weeks to lose its cravings for meat or cheese. The three week period does, however, need to be very consistent—with no "occasional treats"—in order for your body to make the adjustment. Dr. Barnard also makes the useful suggestion that, before cutting meat and dairy out of your life, first make a list of all the vegan foods that you already like a lot. Then stock up on these items so that when you do quit animal foods you have lots of satisfying foods on hand that come from plants. (17)

With a little information and prior preparation, the transition to vegan can become relatively easy for nearly everyone.

Footnotes

1. Fuhrman, Joel, M.D., *Eat to Live,* Little, Brown, and Company, Revised Edition, 2011, p. 309
2. Barnard, Neal, M.D., *Breaking the Food Seduction*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2003, p. 63.
3. Weil, Andrew, M.D., published May 8, 2014, http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/QAA401444/Addicted-to-Food.html
4. Barnard, p. 63.
5. Barnard, p. 17.
6. Yeomans MR, Wright P, Macleod HA,Critchley JAJH, "Effects of Nalmefene on Feeding in Humans," *Psychopharmacology,* 1990; 100: 426-32.
7. MacKillop, published in *University of Georgia Today: News and Information from the University of Georgia, January 24, 2014* http://news.uga.edu/releases/article/impulsive-personality-linked-to-food-addiction/
8. Barnard, p. 50.
9. Barnard, p. 50.

10. Barnard, p. 52.
11. Barnard, p. 64
12. Holt SHA, Brand Miller JC, Petocz P. "An Insulin Index of Foods; the Insulin Demand Generated by 1000-kj Portions of Common Foods," *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*; 66:1264-76.
13. Cassidy, Eugene M. , et. al, "Insulin as a Substance of Misuse in a Patient with Insulin Dependent Diabetes Mellitus," *British Medical Journal*, 1999 Nov 27; 319(7222): 1417–1418.
14. Odie, ELA, "Insulin Habituation and Psychopathy," *British Medical Journal*, 1968; 2:346.
15. Fuhrman, Joel, M.D. , *Super Immunity*, Harper-Collins, 2011, p. 140
16. Fuhrman, Joel, M.D., *Eat to Live,* Little, Brown, and Company, Revised Edition, 2011, p. 309
17. Barnard, pp. 64-65.