

Script – Print – As you age, just say no to the junk food

Greasy pizza, cookies, sugary drinks – you name it – junk food has a grip on many Americans including people between 50 and 80 years old.

About 13% of adults in that age group are addicted to highly processed foods (1 in every 8), according to a [study](#) by the University of Michigan's National Poll on Healthy Aging.

"It doesn't surprise me: these are the ages where people are looking to retire," says Jason Crum, a dietitian with OSF HealthCare. "And they're looking at what they're going to eat. How quickly will it take to eat these things, cooking, and processing. People don't want to do that anymore. They're tired, they're fatigued, so they look for quick, easy things."

More than 2,100 adults between 50-80 were polled so researchers could learn more about the unhealthy relationship with processed foods including sweets, snacks, and fast food. The most common symptoms were intense cravings, the inability to cut down on intake and signs of withdrawal that caused headaches and trouble concentrating.

"These processed foods not only have sodium, but they also have sugar of various types," says Crum. "And those paired together instigate a hormonal response that most of us don't know how to really read and respond to. So we fill ourselves with the calories instead of the actual food or the nutrients that would make our hormones work better, so it makes the addiction stronger."

The study found that women had a greater addiction to these foods than men, especially those in their 50s and early 60s. Older adults who were overweight or suffering from mental health issues or isolation also had a greater risk of addiction to processed foods.

"We have a disconnection between how our gut really feels and how we interpret that hormonally, but also our lifestyle, how active, how busy we are," says Crum. "We see our nurses, for example, running around for 12-14 hours a day. They don't have time to eat, but it's easy in four minutes to eat a piece of pizza and a burger and fries. And that's the disconnect between our gut and our lifestyle and how we interpret that."

According to the study, one reason that processed foods can be addictive is how they can trigger the release of dopamine in the brain's reward system just like the effects of nicotine and alcohol.

"For most people we emotionally eat, it's something to distract us," adds Crum. "And we tend to go for the things that will give us that reward center in our brain, sugar rewards that center, and we look for that as a temporary fix to things."

Instead, Crum suggests people eat more "real" foods and stay away from processed ones. Real food is unprocessed, free of chemicals and full of nutrients such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, dairy, eggs and meat, fish and poultry. Real foods are low in sugar, heart healthy, high in healthy fats, and good for your gut, among other reasons.

"The first thing to do is to ask yourself if you're hungry," he says. "And what am I looking to eat? Do I even know what it's made of? The more real the food is, the better that's going to work for us than these processed foods. There's far less added sugar, there's far less added sodium to it. So it makes it easier for our body to use the nutrients and reduce any cravings and addictions."

For more on nutrition and general wellness, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).