

Stimulants.

How to break the habit.



Coffee

Coffee contains three stimulants - caffeine, theobromine and theophylline, all of which are addictive. Although caffeine is the strongest, theobromine has a similar effect, although it is present in much smaller amounts in coffee. Theophylline is known to disturb normal sleep patterns. Decaffeinated coffee still provides theophylline and theobromine, so it isn't exactly stimulant free. High coffee consumers have a greater risk of a variety of health problems and a higher incidence of birth defects in their children. Coffee stops vital minerals being absorbed. The amount of iron absorbed is reduced to one third if coffee is drunk with a meal. When you quit, you may get withdrawal symptoms for up to three days, which reflects how addicted you've become. After that, if you begin to feel perky and your health improves, that's a good indication that you're better off without coffee.

Tea

Tea is the great British addiction. A strong cup of tea contains as much caffeine as a weak cup of coffee and is certainly addictive. Tea also contains tannin, which can interfere with the absorption of vital minerals such as iron and zinc. Like coffee, drinking too much tea is also associated with a number of health problems including an increased risk of stomach ulcers. Particularly addictive is Earl Grey tea, which contains bergamot, itself a stimulant. The best tasting alternatives are peppermint, fennel, green and fruit teas.

Drinking weak (regular) tea occasionally is unlikely to be a problem.

Sugar

Sugar is the most common addiction of all because of its effect on energy and mood. Too much sugar is associated with heart disease, diabetes, tooth decay and obesity. Frequent overuse of sugar can lead to what is known as glucose intolerance, which means an abnormal blood sugar balance. The symptoms may include irritability, aggressive outbursts, nervousness, depression, crying spells, dizziness, fears and anxiety, confusion, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate, fatigue, insomnia, headaches, palpitations, muscle cramps, excess sweating, digestive problems, allergies, blurred vision, excessive thirst and lack of sex drive.

Does this sound like anyone you know? Probably three in every ten people have a mild form of blood sugar imbalance.

The more sweet foods you have, the greater your taste for sweetness. We all have a natural sweet tooth, which is nature's way of attracting animals to eat fruits. In nature, sweet foods are few and far between and are usually safe to eat. But by refining sugar we've learnt how to cheat nature and eat the pure stuff.

Nowadays concentrated sugar comes in many disguises - glucose, dextrose, maltose, honey, and syrups. All these help to develop a sweet tooth, as does any food with concentrated sweetness. This includes grape juice or too much dried fruit such as raisins, although the sugar in most fruit (fructose) does not have the same effect on the body as glucose, maltose or sucrose (normal sugar).

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Kicking the sugar habit takes time and perseverance:

- Wean yourself off slowly as your taste buds get used to less and less sweetness
- Stop adding sugar to cereals and eating cereals containing sugar – add fruit instead
- When you want something sweet, have a piece of fresh fruit
- Get used to diluting fruit juices with water
- Gradually decrease your overall intake of sweet foods
- Once you're basically sugar-free the odd sweet food is no big deal

Chocolate

Chocolate is full of sugar. It also contains cocoa as its major active ingredient, which provides significant quantities of the stimulant theobromine, whose action is similar although not as strong as caffeine. Theobromine is also obtained from cocoa drinks like hot chocolate. Because of the high sugar and stimulant content of chocolate, plus its delicious taste, it's easy to become a chocoholic.

The best way to quit the habit is to stop and find good alternatives. You can eat healthy 'sweets' from health food shops. Although any of these 'alternatives' are ways to wean yourself off sweets and chocolate, they should be eaten as an occasional treat, not on a daily basis. Be aware that many so called healthy bars are packed with sugar, hydrogenated fat and other not so healthy ingredients - always check labels.

Cola

Cola and some other fizzy drinks contain between 5 and 7mg of caffeine - roughly a quarter of that found in a weak cup of coffee. In addition, these drinks are often high in sugar and colourings and their net stimulant effect can be considerable. Check the ingredients list and stay away from drinks containing caffeine and chemical additives or colourings.

Instead, have fruit or vegetable juices diluted with an equal amount of water. Some fruit teas make a refreshing cold drink and soft drinks made of natural ingredients with no added sugar are also good alternatives.

Alcohol

Alcohol is chemically very similar to sugar, and high in calories. It disturbs normal blood sugar balance and appetite. Enough alcohol suppresses appetite, which leads to more 'empty' calories from alcohol and less nutritious calories from healthy food. Alcohol also destroys or prevents the absorption of many nutrients including vitamin C, B complex, calcium, magnesium and zinc.

The best health results are achieved by being more or less alcohol free - ideally none or up to three small drinks a week. However, a good recommendation to suggest a heavy drinker is to have two weeks off alcohol. After that, no more than five glasses of wine or half pints of lager or beer a week is a good target to aim for.

