

Yale Hosts Historic Conference On Food And Addiction

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In what is believed to be the first meeting of its kind, Yale University is convening nearly 40 experts on nutrition, obesity, and addiction on July 9th and 10th to discuss the controversial topic of food and addiction.

Nora Volkow, M.D., director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, will be the keynote speaker Monday evening at the private meeting in New Haven. "It is important that we study the reasons that people behave in unhealthy ways even when they are aware of potentially devastating consequences," Volkow said. "We believe we can learn a lot about obesity by looking at what we know about the science of drug addiction. In this meeting we will be discussing the commonalities in the brain's reward mechanisms related to compulsive eating as well as drug use for non-medical reasons."

Among the topics of discussion for the meeting: MRI research and other work that shows strong similarities in ways drugs and certain foods affect the brain; the relationship between eating and reward systems in the brain; psychological similarities between food cravings and cravings for drugs, and the implications of this work for government policy, clinical intervention, and the law.

Although terms such as "chocoholic" and "carbohydrate addict" are prevalent in popular culture, there is little scientific consensus about food as an addiction, said Yale Psychology Professor Kelly Brownell, who is co-chair of the meeting.

"Everything changes if food is found to have addictive properties, especially the legal and legislative landscape around marketing foods to children," said Brownell, director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale, which is hosting the meeting. "People often use the language of addiction to explain their relationship with food cravings, withdrawal, irresistible impulses-it is all there."

Co-chair Mark Gold of the University of Florida, who will address the meeting Tuesday, said that in the past, addiction was defined by tolerance and withdrawal. "After our work and that of others on cocaine, it was clear that addiction was more like a pathological, often fatal attraction," Gold said. "The definition of addiction was changed and gambling and sex addiction were considered addictions. Overeating and obesity are candidates for Addictive Disease and such a hypothesis is both testable in humans and can produce novel approaches and treatments for a major public health problem."

Gold said that food, especially highly palatable food, can produce the same effects as drugs of abuse. "It is common for people to eat more than they intend despite dire consequences," he said. "Failed diets and attempts to control overeating, preoccupation with food and eating, shame, anger, and guilt look like traditional addictions."

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