

- Convenience foods

Is your child addicted to junk food?

How to distinguish between normal cravings and more problematic behaviours. By

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JUNK food is now more accessible and enticing than ever, which has led to increased efforts to reduce the promotion of unhealthy food and drink.



Children will see fewer ads for unhealthy food as a voluntary ban by advertisers takes effect ahead of a full crackdown in January.

Here are five red flags that may indicate a junk-food addiction, and expert advice on what you can do to help...

1. INTENSE CRAVINGS BEYOND HUNGER

“One key sign is intense craving beyond hunger. So, the child fixates on specific foods (such as crisps or sweets) and becomes distressed if denied access,” highlights Dr Manpreet Dhuffar-Pottiwal, chartered psychologist and specialist in behavioural addictions.

2. LOSS OF CONTROL

“This is the inability to stop eating junk food even when full, often in secret or past the point of discomfort,” says Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal.

3. WITHDRAWAL-LIKE SYMPTOMS

Irritability, mood swings or headaches when junk food is unavailable is another red flag to look out for.

4. NEGLECT OF HEALTHIER OPTIONS

“Persistent refusal of balanced meals or previously enjoyed whole foods could also be a sign,” notes the psychologist.

5. IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

“Look out for avoidance of social activities, declining school performance, or guilt/shame about eating habits,” advises Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal.

What role does dopamine play in how children respond to junk food?

“When we consume junk food, the high levels of sugar, fat, and salt stimulate the release of dopamine in the brain – a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward,” explains consultant psychiatrist Dr Adarsh Dharendra.

“This surge creates a temporary sense of satisfaction, reinforcing the idea of food as a ‘feelgood factor.’ Over time, the brain begins to crave more of these foods to achieve the same high, laying the foundation for compulsive eating.”

Are some junk foods more addictive?

“Processed foods engineered to maximise ‘bliss points,’ such as crisps, chocolate, sugary cereals and fast food are particularly problematic,” warns Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal. “These items combine refined carbohydrates, fats, and artificial additives, disrupting satiety signals.”

How can a junk-food addiction affect a child’s physical and mental health?

“These habits may escalate into fullblown binge eating disorder, disrupting daily life and contributing to low self-esteem, especially in the context of weight gain,” says Dr Dharendra.

“Individuals may experience irritability and mood swings.”

How can parents distinguish between what’s normal and what’s a problem?

Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal says: “Key red flags include daily distress over accessing junk food and skipping activities or lying to obtain treats. Using food to self-soothe during stress could also be a red flag.”

TIPS ON WHAT TO DO Model balanced behaviours:

“Intergenerationally, parents’ own eating habits and emotional associations with food (e.g., using snacks as rewards) can normalise dysfunctional behaviours,” says Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal.

“Avoid labelling foods as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’”

Create structure: “Offer regular, balanced meals to prevent extreme hunger,” advises Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal. Involve your child: “Collaborate on meal planning or cooking to build autonomy and curiosity,” recommends Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal.

Gradual changes: “Replace ultra-processed snacks with minimally processed alternatives,” suggests Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal. “For example, offer fruit with nut butter instead of sweets.”

Address emotional needs: “Teach nonfood coping strategies such as mindfulness, meditation as a family or creative play,” says Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal.

Environmental tweaks: “Limit junk food availability at home, rather than outright bans, which can backfire,” advises Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal.

Seek help: “Consult a GP or paediatrician if physical health markers (e.g. weight, blood sugar) are concerning, says Dr Dhuffar-Pottiwal.