

Raiding your cupboards like a vending machine? Big Food is feeding our snack addiction.

Packaged food titans use our biology to get us to not just like their products, but to want more and more. Can't eat just one? They're counting on it.

Michael Moss, Opinion contributor

In 10 years of writing about the processed food industry, I've been struck by how many insiders don't touch their own goods. They can't without losing control.

At Philip Morris, which made cigarettes and Oreos, only one of those products scared the company's general counsel, Steve Parrish. He smoked, but only during meetings, and could easily put his pack away for the rest of the day. Not so with the cookies. "I'd avoid even opening a bag of Oreos because instead of eating one or two, I would eat half the bag," he told me.

Now comes word from the current owner of Oreos, Mondelez, that maybe he just didn't try hard enough. The company has produced an instructional video on how to eat snacks like Oreos — or chips or cheese puffs for that matter — without wolfing down the whole bag. Tip No. 6: "Finish one bite before starting the next."

This is such a disquieting moment in food. More and more of us are caring about what we put into our bodies, and the big food manufacturers are feeling the pressure. Hoping to regain our trust, they're slashing their use of salt, sugar and fat. They're easing up on their marketing to kids. They're adding nice things to their formulas, like protein or fiber. Or, in the case of Oreo, offering a clinic for the hopelessly hooked.

But should we really put any faith in Big Food to fix the trouble it caused us? I thought maybe we could, until my latest crawl through the underbelly of this nearly \$1 trillion industry left me shocked by all they do to dominate our eating habits. After all, these are companies doing what companies do: selling as much product as they can by maximizing the allure. And yet, in a matter so critical to our health, they're using our deepest human instincts against us to make their products more addictive than ever, and then maneuvering to exploit our efforts to regain control of our health.

Daily addictions

We can thank Philip Morris for clarifying just what is meant by addiction. After years of vehement denial, the company conceded in 2000 that smoking was indeed addictive, and in legal proceedings the CEO offered his definition: "Addiction is a repetitive behavior that some people find difficult to quit."

This certainly describes some eating habits, though our problems with food are not limited to the compulsive binging that mirrors the behavior of drug addicts. Most of us are unsettled by food in one way or another, feeling not quite in control of our eating, or taxed by the effort it takes to exert that control. For some, this trouble rises to the level of eating disorders.

I thought the pandemic would at least give those of us who eat too much junk the chance to escape all the snacking at work. But food manufacturers adjusted their marketing strategy to capture our anxiety — like those [Twitter posts and ads](#) using six foot-long bags of Doritos to measure your safety zone — and rejoiced at the [soaring sales](#) of their junkiest products as we turned our cupboards into vending machines. In the early days of COVID-19, manufacturers of cookies, crackers and chips saw sales jump nearly 30% as people loaded up on items they hadn't had since childhood. And now, the companies aren't about to let us go.

In her outlook for 2021, Wall Street analyst [Alexia Howard](#) says, "Many companies are investing in more sophisticated and targeted approaches to marketing to these newly acquired consumers in hopes of building long-term loyalty."

What is it about these products that makes us so vulnerable to their marketing ploys? As much as I've focused on salt, sugar and fat, those are but part of the industry's arsenal. Behind the formulas, the companies are using our biology — our natural addictions, if you will — to get us to not just like their products, but to want more and more.

Built to overeat

In ways I never imagined, our entire body is built to get us to not just want to eat, but to overeat. As paleoanthropologists explained, putting on body fat was a [really good thing](#) that distinguished us from other mammals: It insulated us from cold, staved off starvation and fueled our growing brains. We developed certain instincts over millennia: We came to love food that is cheap (read: easily accessible, whether in the wilderness or in today's grocery aisles), that is varied, that is loaded with calories.

Then the industry changed the nature of our food to make overeating an everyday thing, and suddenly those good instincts of ours blew up. Now, even body fat works against us. In an Oregon neuroscience lab, I slid into a functional MRI where researchers have discovered a startling aspect of our biology: When we gain weight, [the brain gets more excited](#) merely looking at food, or food advertising.

The processed food industry came into its stride in 1963 when an advertising copywriter came up with this slogan, "[Betcha Can't Eat Just One.](#)" And there was far more truth in that than we knew.

We need a cure from convenience

There's maybe some chance that today, this same industry could come up with products that could prove that slogan wrong. But I don't think we can wait for them. What we eat has never mattered more. Call it addiction, or just a very bad habit, smart people looking at this have convinced me that the cure to our dependence on convenience foods needs more than a little tinkering with formulas, or some extra willpower on our part.

No one strategy works for everyone. In my household, for instance, we cut back on sugary sodas by switching to plain seltzer. But there's one thing to remember, no matter your approach. The products we're hooked on are lying in wait to ensnare us when we stop paying attention, and the cravings for them can happen so fast that the rational part of our brain that asks, "Wait a minute, is this really what I want to do?" gets left behind. If your cookie or chips craving hits at 3 p.m. every day, it might help to have your alternative at the ready: a stretch, a phone call to a friend, a handful of nuts.

I've written before that knowing what the companies do to make their products so irresistible is oddly empowering. And I still believe this. But in looking at addiction, I've learned that having the knowledge — coupled with a plan of action of your devising — is more than just power. It's the freedom of free will.

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