

Are stimulants affecting your energy & weight loss?

Does this sound familiar to you?

You reluctantly crawl out of bed and head for the kettle for a strong cup of tea or coffee, perhaps light up a cigarette or have some fast releasing sugar, such as jam on toast. Up go your blood sugar and adrenalin levels and you start to feel normal. Or, do you lie in bed thinking about all the things that have gone wrong, could go wrong or will go wrong? You start to worry about everything you've got to do, haven't done or should have done. About ten minutes of this gets enough adrenaline pumping through you to get you out of bed.

Stimulants

If either of these scenarios sound like you, you're caught in a vicious cycle of stress, sugar and stimulants, with all its negative effects on your mind and mood.

Stimulants promise instant energy, but just make the problem worse. As you know by now, balancing your blood sugar is the key to sustained energy and weight control. Stimulants also promote the brain's feel good chemicals. In times of stress, the adrenal glands release a combination of hormones, including cortisol and adrenalin, that break down stores of glucose and raise your blood sugar levels, tapping into your energy reserves to provide instant fuel to deal with the apparent danger (in case you need to run away from a sabre tooth tiger for example).

Of course, today's emergencies take place mainly inside our heads (overdrafts, relationships, etc.), but we still produce adrenalin, and that still raises blood sugar levels.

Stimulants have the same effect, stirring up adrenalin and dopamine seriously messing with your blood sugar and so encouraging your body to store fat.

Caffeine

The reason people get hooked on drinking coffee, especially in the morning, is because it makes them feel more energised and alert but after their first cup of coffee, coffee drinkers don't feel any better than people who never drink coffee.

Coffee drinkers just feel better than they did when they woke up. In other words, drinking coffee relieves the symptoms of withdrawal from coffee.

It's highly addictive! Also, the more caffeine you consume, the more your body and brain become insensitive to their own natural stimulants, dopamine and adrenalin. You then need more stimulants just to feel normal, pushing your body to produce more dopamine and adrenalin.

The result is adrenal exhaustion, leading to apathy, lethargy and an inability to cope. Caffeine can be found in tea, cola, energy drinks, chocolate and green tea, although drinking a weak cup of tea is unlikely to be a problem.

Sugar is another stimulant, which we cover in more detail on page 36.

Kick the habit

Chocolate is high in sugar and stimulants and is delicious, so it's easy to become a chocoholic. If you are like the many others who simply cannot eat one square of chocolate and then stop, it is probably better to commit to giving it up for one month. After that, you'll find that you have lost all craving for chocolate. Cola, diet and energy drinks, again, are full of caffeine and sugar and will only inhibit weight loss.

Cigarettes. In addition to all the known health risks, smoking also affects your blood sugar and depletes essential vitamins and minerals.

Changing any habit can be stressful in itself, so it's best not to quit everything in one go. A good strategy is to start with your diet and, as you feel better, you will feel more motivated to kick other bad habits along the way. Cut down on stimulants until you feel able to give some of them up for good. Work out how many you consume daily; you'll probably find it is more than you think, so make a plan to reduce your intake. You'll be surprised how much better you will feel simply by cutting back.

Sugar is a stimulant too

So now we have seen that caffeine, stress, cigarettes and sugar keep your blood sugar out of balance by giving you an artificial boost, closely followed by an energy slump. This sets up cravings and keeps you addicted. It also encourages you to eat more, as you try to summon up the energy you need to get through your day.

Addressing this imbalance will help you to feel calmer, more energised and alert without the ups and downs. You can begin to see how much easier it is to stick to a weight loss plan, if you are not trying to contend with this vicious cycle. Now let's take a closer look at sugar and why it is such a villain to health and weight loss.

Sugar

Sugar is an artificially refined substance that works more like a drug than a food. Dr Candace Pert, research professor at Georgetown University Medical Centre in Washington, DC says, "I consider sugar to be a drug, a highly purified plant product that can become addictive. Relying on an artificial form of glucose (sugar) to give us a quick pick me up is analogous to, if not as dangerous as, shooting heroin." It unbalances blood sugar and causes you to experience false cravings when you're not hungry.

Too much sugar can play havoc with your weight and hormones, it can cause fatigue, increased hyperactivity and tooth decay. Refined sugar is empty calories. We get no nutritional benefit from it. When there's too much sugar in your blood stream, the excess sticks to protein fibres between your skin cells, causing skin stressing reactions. The result is premature skin ageing, causing tough, leathery skin and wrinkles.

When sugar isn't needed, it's stored as fat. Eating sugar raises levels of the hormone insulin in your blood. This creates a risk for diabetes. Sugar can damage artery walls, making it easy for cholesterol and fat to build up and cause heart disease. Too much sugar affects the immune system by causing white blood cells to be sluggish, thus lowering resistance to disease. It can increase hyperactivity.

It encourages overgrowth of yeast (candida) and leads to fatigue because of the rise and fall of your blood sugar level, and it can cause anxiety and irritability. Sugar inhibits blood flow to the gums, leading to disease and tooth decay. Both sugar and insulin are highly inflammatory and not only aggravate any painful condition, but also fuel 'silent' low grade systemic inflammation.

Cutting down on sugar

One problem with sugar is knowing where it is. You may not put sugar in your tea, or eat chocolate regularly but it is also found in many hidden places. Ketchup is 23.6% sugar for instance.

Cans of beans or tomatoes, cereals, flavoured yoghurts, so called healthy crunch bars, ready made and processed meals, are often a hidden source of sugar. Check food labels for hidden sugars. Stay away from artificial sweeteners, linked to side effects such as migraine and some cancers. Furthermore, some studies show they can even stimulate appetite!

Highly refined products such as white bread or rice have a high GL. If you eat them you get a rapid increase in blood sugar level and a surge in energy, similar to the effect of sugar. This is followed by a drop as the body scrambles to balance blood sugar levels. This is why you often get an afternoon slump, having eaten a white bread sandwich and some chocolate or similar for lunch. This effect often leads you to reach for more chocolate or coffee for a new energy boost, to be followed by the same slump soon afterwards. It's a cycle.

So, cut right back on sugar and stick to eating low GL foods to keep your blood sugar stable. Avoid refined and processed foods. Keep active and do regular exercise, as you are most likely to snack when you are bored or inactive. Exercise will also give you some of the feel-good hormones that you also get from eating sugar.

After 10 days of cutting out sugar you will have increased energy, your emotions will be on a more even keel and, you will have lost the taste for it. If you make sure you are trying at least one new food a week, you will not feel the least bit deprived.

Top tips for cutting down on stimulants

A vicious cycle

Remember that many of us are caught up in a vicious cycle of stress, sugar and stimulants, which leaves us feeling tired, depressed and stressed much of the time.

Use this as your motivation to change.

Pick one!

Pick one stimulant you use frequently (other than cigarettes, which takes a different strategy). Could you realistically cut it out for a month? If not, what could you reduce your intake to?

Coffee

To find out what effect it has on you, quit for just two weeks. You may get withdrawal symptoms for up to 3 days (e.g. headaches, irritability). These reflect how addicted you've become. After this, if you begin to feel perky and your health improves, that's a good indication you're better off without coffee.

Changing habits

Changing any food habit can be stressful in itself, so it's best not to quit everything in one go. A good strategy is to avoid something for a month and then see how you feel.

Coffee drinkers

Coffee drinkers don't feel any better than people who never drink coffee. They just feel better than they did when they first woke up! All coffee does is relieve the symptoms of coffee withdrawal!

Tea

Tea (including green tea and Earl Grey) contains caffeine and tannin, which interferes with the absorption of essential minerals, such as iron and zinc. If you're addicted to tea, try stopping for 2 weeks and see how you feel. One cup of weak tea a day is ok.

Which Stimulants?

Find out which stimulants are most important to you, by completing the "Breaking Stimulant Addictions?" grid (p38) over one week and ask your self several questions:

Question 1:

Which substance, if any, do you have in one form or other several times a day

Question 2:

Which do you use as a pick me up, perhaps to get you out of bed in the morning or when your energy is flagging during the day?

Question 3:

Which would you find the hardest to stop completely for a month?

TOP TIP!

Get your blood sugar balance under control before becoming a non-smoker. It will make the process much easier as your moods are likely to be more stable and the cravings less severe.

Cigarettes

If you smoke, talk to your doctor about alternative ways to become a nonsmoker. Smoking drains your body of certain vitamins and minerals, so be sure to supplement your diet.

Targets

Set yourself similar targets for up to 3 stimulants. Sometimes they overlap. For example, if you can't stand coffee without sugar, then cutting out sugar means no coffee.

Soft drinks

Cola contains as much caffeine as a cup of coffee and is high in sugar or artificial sweeteners, so its net stimulant effect can be considerable. Stay away from drinks containing caffeine, chemical additives, artificial sweeteners or colourings.

Sugar

Reduce sugar in hot drinks and food, eat less dried fruit, dilute fruit juice and cut out squash. Also check for hidden sugar in prepackaged foods. If you want something sweet, have fruit or try xylitol (plum sugar). It takes about a month for a preference for less sweet foods to kick in. After that, most people lose the taste for sugar.

Reduce cravings

Reduce cravings with an excellent low GL diet, a good breakfast, and avoid going hungry, to keep your blood sugar balanced.

Breaking stimulant addictions

Ideally, you want to cut out stimulants for a month to gauge the effect they are having on you.

However, start by cutting down gradually. Record your current intake in the day 1 row now and then use this grid to set your daily targets and record your progress.

Note that 1 alcohol unit = 1 small glass of wine / 1 bottle of beer / 1 shot of spirits.

Reduce stimulant use each week until your addiction is broken. If you are having more than 10 stimulant units a week, this is going to have at least some impact on your wellbeing. If you score 30 or more this could well be contributing to health and mood problems and can also impact the speed at which you lose weight. Set your target to reduce to no more than 15-17 per week and less if you can manage it! Occasional use is then okay.

	sweets	tea / coffee	fizzy drink	chocolate	alcohol	added sugar	total
day 1							
day 2							
day 3							
day 4							
day 5							
day 6							
day 7							
target	none	1 a day	1 a week	100g a week	5 units a week	1 tsp a week	