

Cracking the Holiday Calorie Code



By PJ Glassey, CSCS

Have you ever wondered why grocery stores put out their Halloween candy early in September? I bet you know the answer. They count on the fact that we will rationalize buying it by telling ourselves it will be for the trick-or-treaters, saying something like, “Since I’m here, I’d better get that candy now so I won’t have to worry about it later when it’s too late and they have run out.”



We all know good and well they won’t run out and in fact, will still have so much left over they will mark it down “½ off” after Halloween. This of course is another marketing ploy to get us to buy some for “the holidays” or even, “next Halloween”.

So we give in to the con and buy our bag of candy in September. Some of us even go so far as to actually put it out in a bowl by the door to convince ourselves our intentions were pure. Five or six bowls later, Halloween finally rolls around, and by then the average American has spent more than \$15 on Halloween candy, but less than \$3 of that will be given out to the kiddies. When the dust has settled each year, America has spent over \$1 billion on Halloween candy alone!

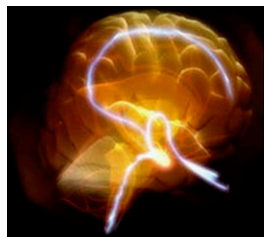
While this is, of course, a personal atrocity, the worst ramification to this habit occurs in your own brain. You have started an avalanche in the way your neurons work, and if not interrupted, it will guarantee another year of cyclic holiday weight gain (always successful), followed by the New Year’s resolution of weight loss (rarely successful).

The holiday calorie code is a vicious cycle that seems to repeat itself no matter what we do to prevent it. Willpower doesn't seem to be the issue, because it happens to many people with plenty of that to spare. In order to break this cycle we must first understand our own brains and how they work.

What we are doing without realizing it, is brainwashing ourselves into this holiday cycle. Starting in September, we gear up the nerves in our brain by firing the synapses that cause us to crave these treats. The brain doesn't know the difference between eating a certain food and thinking about a certain food. It's the same nerve pathway being traveled either way.

Every time we travel a nerve pathway, it gets deeper and stronger. That's how athletes improve with practice, and it is also how cravings and addictions become ingrained. It all starts when we go in the store and see the candy (nerve pathway activation #1). Then we buy the candy (same nerve pathway activation, but now it's being traveled a second time). Then we caress the candy and maybe even give it a quick hug when we take it out of the shopping bag at home (third and fourth nerve pathway activations). Then we open the bag and smell the sugar (activation #5 and 6). Next, we open the first candy bar and hear the familiar crackle of the wrapper (activation #7 and 8). Finally, we eat the candy, but of course we have to sample the other ones because we bought the variety pack (activations #9-23). Some of you reading this will notice your mouth is watering already.

By this time, we might as well take that candy and "get a room" because the public display of affection is too



much to bear, even though we are alone in our homes and the dog is the only one watching.

Next, you limit yourself to only one piece at a time so you don't get "carried away" and won't "run out" for the "trick-or-treaters" you "bought the candy for." Piece by piece, the bowl empties out. You couldn't possibly have eaten that much so fast! You are sure it is the kids eating too much or the spouse is just being a pig. Heck, the dog probably has been jumping up and sneaking singles too. He's really smart – just eating one at a time so you won't notice, and then making sure his whiskers are wiped off to hide the evidence. Ah hah! That's where those mystery spots in the carpet are coming from! It's the darn dog cleaning his whiskers!

Now you are mad because everyone else gobbled up the candy you bought for the kiddies! How could they? Well, this time you get two bags to refill the bowl so there will surely be enough left when Halloween rolls around in seven weeks. That bowl disappears too and all along the way, whether you are eating it consciously or automatically, you are making your cravings stronger. Even *thinking* about it when you are away from the bowl makes the cravings more ingrained.

Next you decide to bring the candy to the office because everyone else in your house has obviously lost control. Surely your friends at work will be much more considerate than your family, and since dogs aren't allowed, you can check that one off the list. To your surprise however, the candy disappears faster than ever. How could this be since you are positive you are eating way less than you did at home? Everyone else denies it and to your dismay, you conclude that you must work with a bunch of liars!

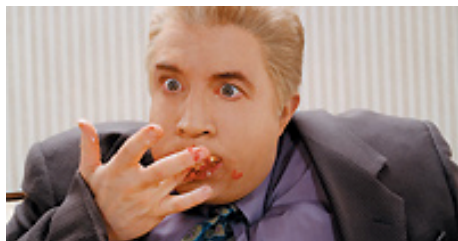
By the time Halloween does finally roll around, you have effectively brain washed yourself into being a sugar junky. A recent study compared cocaine craving to sugar craving, and guess which one won? The sugar craving was actually harder to break than cocaine!

Soon after Halloween comes Thanksgiving and all the candy, cranberry sauce, drinks, and desserts with it. This is all sugar too. Even the breads are sugar as far as your body is concerned, so your cravings for those are increased as well as the deserts.

Just when you are through feeding your sugar cravings from Thanksgiving, Christmas shows up and all of its associated gingerbread, frosting, cookies, pies, and so on.

By this time our stomach's capacity has been stretched so it can accommodate more food. It takes almost 30% more food to get the same sensation of "fullness" than it did before the holidays! Couple this with a little wine which increases the appetite (especially for carbs and fat), and

combine that with the fact that alcohol specifically attacks the fat burning metabolism, and it's a wonder we don't all look like Jiminy Glick by year's end!



Do we even need to talk about the days in between the actual holidays? This is where most of our weight is gained, as opposed to the actual holiday binge meals themselves. The nibbling and grazing that occurs to satisfy our addictions is phenomenal – especially the fact that most of it is unconscious. Our brain washing has been so effective; we don't even know what or when we are eating any more!

Finally it's time for the New Year's parties. We are starting to feel bad about the weight we've put on, but it's OK because we wear long pants and coats in the winter to cover it all up. We will worry about the weight problem in January after this "one last hurrah" on New Year's Eve! This New Year's resolution will be **SERIOUS**, and the weight will certainly come off this time! Yeah, right.

When it is time to start your New Year's "diet", you are already fighting an uphill battle. You now have addictions and cravings formed with deep-rooted nerve pathways that are so hard to break, by the end of January you have given up. This is mainly because now that you aren't eating the sugar any more, you are thinking about those foods five times more often than you thought about them *and* ate them before the diet. Guess what this is doing? Yep, your cravings are getting even worse despite the fact you aren't eating those things at all. That's why you rebound so much when you go off the diet!

So now that you understand the holiday calorie code, how do you crack it? By interrupting the brain washing process and turning it around to use it to your advantage! Thinking of alternatives to the sugar addiction when those thoughts come into your brain stops the negative impulses from carving deeper channels, and instead activates the impulses you want to become stronger.

This thought-switching process gets easier with practice and prevents the holiday brainwash. You can also



plan ahead each day and bring some cut up fruit to replace the candy. Drink a glass of water when an urge hits. Have some frozen blueberries instead of those special edition holiday colored M&M's. If you do have a cookie or piece of candy, don't have a

second. Check that one off the list so that particular pathway won't be traveled again.

Simply switching your thoughts can be enough, but this habit along with telling yourself every morning you will make healthy choices that day can be even more powerful. Start telling yourself now that this will be your fittest holiday season. Say this out loud in the mirror so you activate multiple positive pathways and ingrain them deeper with each practice.

Even if this only partially works and you gain just half the weight you normally do, getting it off with your New Year's resolution will be more than twice as easy because you aren't fighting the uphill battle of hundreds of deep and ingrained pathways to overcome and reverse! What have you got to lose? Or more importantly, think about what you DON'T have to gain!

Lastly, I want to address holiday alcohol. I won't get into this subject very far, because it could be a whole separate booklet by itself. What I will tell you is that alcohol is the **ONLY** type of calorie that puts you straight into a fat storing mode, and completely shuts down your fat burning ability. In fact, alcohol will make you store all the fat you have eaten 4 hours before the drink, as well as the fat in the food you eat up to 8 hours after the drink! Just keep this in mind...

The only thing you can do to ensure your failure this holiday season is to do *the same thing you have always done*. Ben Franklin once said, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." It's time to *try something truly different this year!*

IS YOUR FOOD HEALTHY?

Knowing what foods are healthy and slimming is actually pretty simple, when you use the following 7 questions as your guide:

- Does it need to be refrigerated?
- Does it have four ingredients or less?
- Could it be washed?
- Can you pronounce all the ingredients?
- Could you eat it raw?
- Did your great grandmother eat it?
- Is it organic, or at least non-GMO?

YES A YES answer usually means it's healthy. A NO answer can often mean it's unhealthy and/or fattening. **No**

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