

## Response to Alva Noe's "Sugar's Transition From Nice To Nasty"

Alva Noe, a contributor to NPR, argues sugar addiction is the result of high-sugar foods becoming cheaper and more convenient to fast-paced environments, and is not comparable to drug addiction. You can read his article here:

[http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/10/30/499732163/sugars-transition-from-nice-to-nasty?utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=npr&utm\\_term=nprnews&utm\\_content=2056](http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/10/30/499732163/sugars-transition-from-nice-to-nasty?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=2056)

His justifications for these argument include the history of sugar's use and availability, the utilization of high-fructose corn syrup as a substitute, and that sugar-addiction won't leave you rummaging about your mother's purse stealing her money for a "hit." While his points about *why* we consume such high amounts of sugar (convenience and cost) may be apt, his lack of forethought in the production of this piece leaves the reader concluding that it's society that reinforces the intake of high-sugar foods, and not addiction to sugar in itself. While there may be a cultural phenomena occurring (convenience and cost of these foods), this doesn't alleviate the fact that a high intake of processed sweets/products contributes to excess weight gain<sup>1</sup>, potential for insulin resistance and acquiring diabetes<sup>2</sup>, and subsequent heart disease<sup>3</sup> (to name a few). **I'll both defend Noe's points about cultural influence on diet, but will argue his lack of seriousness regarding excess sugar intake addiction.**

Noe begins with a brief introduction (with credible sources<sup>4</sup>) outlining sugar's addictive properties to those of the body's response to addictive drugs—such as cocaine—and then argues the following:

"The verdict is in: Sugar is bad. Very, very bad.

That may be so. The comparison with cocaine, however — I'd like to suggest — is misleading.

Sugar, after all — and unlike cocaine — is food. We are addicted to sugar the way we are addicted to cheap gas. It isn't for the thrill of the ride that we have developed such a gas-dependency. It's because we really need to solve transportation puzzles. We need to get our kids to school, to go shopping and to commute to work ourselves.

And so with sugar."

Following this, Noe writes, "And the remarkable thing is that this addiction to sweet, cheap calories is nothing new and cannot be seriously blamed on today's sugar industry."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/sugary-drinks-fact-sheet/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/carbohydrates/carbohydrates-and-blood-sugar/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-topics/weight-control/health\\_risks\\_being\\_overweight/Pages/health-risks-being-overweight.aspx](https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-topics/weight-control/health_risks_being_overweight/Pages/health-risks-being-overweight.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Sugar+addiction%3A+pushing+the+drug-sugar+analogy+to+the+limit>

He goes on to elaborate that this problem isn't new<sup>5</sup> and we can't blame sugar for our problems. Or rather, the "individual" can't be blamed, but rather society as a whole. At first glance this concept may show glimmers of truth, the overall verbiage and tone of Noe's essay seems to point at sociocultural values being to blame. While I cannot seem to grasp his most concrete points through his rambling diatribe, it seems safe to assume that while he may not be defending the U.S.'s extreme intake of high-sugar foods, he's not exactly arguing a constructive point surrounding the perception of sugar intake. His "cheap gas" metaphor falls short, and he fails to understand drug addiction, too. (The "thrill of the ride" may be what starts one on the path of drug addiction, behavioral, physiological, and psychological dependency becomes much of a motivator for continued use.). To top all this off, he seems to conclude nothing constructive at all besides reaffirming what we already know; that a high refined-sugar intake has negative health consequences.

So let me put my spin on this conundrum.

First, an "addiction" can be defined as, "the fact or condition of being addicted to a particular substance, thing, or activity" (Google) Let's start with sugar addiction, and how it is **very much comparable to drug addiction**. As far as I know, no scientist has ever argued that addiction to sugar will make you act like a crack junkie, either through theft or crime. Heck, even sex addiction wouldn't. To think so is preposterous, and frankly, I think Noe used this "sugar=drugs" research as a clickbait to stand on his soapbox. Soapbox for what, I don't know. But if you read the research and understand *why* scientists study the comparativeness between sugar-addiction and drug-addiction, it starts making a whole lot more sense.

Understanding addiction has its own pitfalls; there are environmental factors, genetic factors, and psychological factors as well. Many of these things feed off of each other, so nailing one specific concept down to why you're addicted is a losing battle. Coming back to our sugar dilemma, while Noe is correct that socioenvironmental constructs open us up to a high availability of sugar-dense, cheap foods, it doesn't alleviate the fact that the human body is hard-wired to crave these foods over, let's say, a plate of grilled chicken, white rice, and broccoli.

With that in mind, there are certain genetic perimeters that open individuals up to a higher potential incidence of drug addiction<sup>6</sup>. While environmental factors<sup>7</sup> largely play the dominant role in obesity development (which could concur some sentiments Noe argues), there are also genetic factors<sup>8</sup> that cannot be ignored, such as likelihood to be attracted to certain foods or having a unique physiological response to these foods (meaning, some individuals are more likely to have an addictive response to a food than that of another individual).

To conclude, Noe makes a decent argument about our sociocultural setup; that we have a ready supply of cheap, sugar/calorie dense foods at our disposal. While he may argue this as a simple occurrence, and not a problem, it does not eliminate that there is a problem. As I have previously written in "3 Reasons Twinkies Are Like Heroin," and have previously argued the point scientists have researched, is that 1) you create a behavioral habit with this substance, 2) you create a biological

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<sup>6</sup> <http://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/addiction/genes/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2016/07/403531/genetic-risk-obesity-grew-stronger-obesogenic-environment>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/why-people-become-overweight>

dependency on this substance, and 3) you create a psychological dependence on this substance. And if that's not a drug addiction, I don't know what is.