

THE 10th ANNUAL
SHAPE ISSUE

VOGUE

APR

RIHANNA

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& How She Really
Feels About
Her Curves

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THE SWEET HERE AFTER

Fearing that her sugar cravings are bordering on addiction, Marcia DeSanctis attempts to strike mocha lattes, butterscotch drops, birthday cake, and all things sweet from her diet. Photographed by Tim Walker.

Several days after I ended my toxic affair with sugar, I went to see David Nathan, M.D., director of the General Clinical Research Center and the Diabetes Center at Massachusetts General Hospital and professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. I had jettisoned what I loved most in life: refined sugar of every stripe—pastries laden with chocolate ganache, frosted doughnuts, cookies, Kraft caramels, and three-layer coconut cake. I had barely made it through my unsweetened breakfast, so I was cranky. Halloween, my autumn birthday, Thanksgiving, and

Christmastime's sugarpalooza were oncoming storms of gustatory deprivation. I invited Nathan, one of the world's leading public-health researchers, to confirm that I was addicted to the white stuff. He would have none of it.

"Is hedonic eating—eating because it gives you pleasure—the same as addictive behavior? What about people who like salty foods or fat?" He hauled out a bottle of Frank's RedHot Sauce from a drawer and set it on his desk as if it were a tankard of ale. "I prefer spicy things. But I'm not addicted. I like them. They're rewarding to my taste buds. *Addiction* is a very loaded word, and those of us in medical science are loath to use it in the context of eating behaviors."

Damn. So it was my fault that I couldn't keep my hand out of the cookie jar? Despite Nathan's expert nonchalance, left to my own devices I would forever skip dinner and go straight to the cherry pie. This was more than "hedonic eating." It was a problem. Recently, as I spun through a whirl of family obligations, professional disappointments, and the first gale winds of hormonal disturbance, my lust for sweets began to not only increase but adversely affect me. A mocha latte strung me out. The blissed-out sensation from eating a handful of butterscotch drops was followed by shaky hands and fatigue, but the remedy was more candy. The final straw: The dentist admonished me—a mother of two teenagers!—for five new cavities, and I saw my future as a toothless crone. A flurry of books and studies on sugar addiction, blogs that placed sugar's evil qualities roughly on par with those of the bubonic plague, and articles on celebrities exorcising their sweet demons just added to the pop-culture noise.

My first stop was the office of my endocrinologist, Egils Bogdanovics, M.D., the medical director of the Hungerford Diabetes Center in northwestern Connecticut. I'm relatively

healthy and not overweight, but I insisted he hear my sugar lament. Then I endured a glucose-tolerance test. I drank 100 grams of sugar sludge and experienced an hour of solid pleasure, as if I'd been shot with a nice, warm tranquilizer gun. But soon, my la-la state turned edgy, and then I tanked. My glucose number indicated that although my pancreas produced enough insulin to keep the levels from going too high (which would suggest diabetes or prediabetes), I was on the very low side of normal, making me insulin-sensitive.

"Here you see in black-and-white the crashing feeling that you get," said Bogdanovics about how overexuberantly the glucose slipped into my bloodstream. "It's one of the reasons to avoid simple carbohydrates, because it will elicit this insulin response. Someone like you, thin with no reserves, could get these kinds of postprandial symptoms a couple of hours later." Among them: shaking, irritability, and palpitations, which culminated for me in fatigue. In sum: Although my metabolism allowed me to get away with eating lots of sweets, I was prone to mean bouts of the sugar blues.

So I quit. Cold turkey. And it was a slog on the sugar wagon. Fruit was allowed because fiber delays the mainlining effect of natural fructose into the body, as was alcohol, which is metabolized in a different way from refined sugar. (As long as I wasn't gulping down syrupy gimlets, which I now wanted for breakfast.) What's the point of coffee without pastry to soak it up? Greek yogurt was all very nice, and clementines pretty, but my mouth searched in vain for that zing, and the rest of me for that rush. Kicking sugar made me feel, at first, hungover. Then I was irritable, especially as I poured three cups of confectioner's sugar into the buttercream for my daughter's birthday cake, the one that I couldn't eat. Soon I was crawling out of my skin. The fifth day, I woke up and swore I smelled brownies baking.

The disappointment of my palate paled in comparison to the cravings I experienced. It turns out that I was jonesing for the serotonin that had ceased flooding my brain. According to Judith Wurtman, Ph.D., a research scientist at MIT's Department of Brain and Cognitive Science, while sugar is not literally addictive, carbohydrates increase the level in the brain of the feel-good neurotransmitter. "If you're feeling depressed or angry, agitated, tired, or distracted," explains Wurtman, "an increase in serotonin will bring you back to a normal operating level." Women have learned to regulate minor mood changes by eating carbohydrates, especially before their periods, when estrogen levels drop and serotonin activity decreases.

At my age, my cycles are out of whack, so my brain's carb-alert system is pegged to the ON switch. "When you're perimenopausal, it's sort of like having permanent PMS. Isn't that wonderful?" says Wurtman. "So you grab a candy bar. If you had eaten oatmeal or sweet potatoes or parsnips, it would



GLAZED OVER
Rife with glucose, the author's diet was making her peak and crash. Painting by Boo Ritson; Poppy Sebire Gallery. Set design by Rhea Thierstein. Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

have had the same effect, but it wouldn't have tasted as good."

If carbohydrates are nature's tranquilizer, I was overdosing. One can't seem to avoid comparing sugar to a drug. "We use the words *chocoholic* or *carb-craver*, yet we tend to ignore patients who talk in the language of addiction to describe their relationship to food," says Kelly Brownell, Ph.D., director of Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. "The magnitude of the effect certainly is not as strong as what you get from cocaine or morphine or alcohol, but the whole body of evidence suggests that sugar affects the brain in a very similar way."

My brain-reward-chemical levels were at rock bottom; therefore, so was I. In my solitary writer's life, sometimes the bag of black licorice is my only companion. Now fruit cup was supposed to cut it. Or hummus. Right. But I also had grown used to having efficient sources of energy from quick bursts of glucose and insulin, so on a hormonal level, my body had some adapting to do. My error, says Kathleen Keller, Ph.D., assistant professor at Columbia University's Institute of Human Nutrition, was in quitting so abruptly. "Part of this is a clinical response to the drastic change you made. That's why I tell people, when they're going to make dietary changes, it has to be at a slow pace. Otherwise, your body will try to fight back to that state of status quo," she says. "The good news is that after a certain period of time, you do adjust."

And I did. By day fourteen, the ripe pears tasted sweeter, and the Cheddar that was my coffee-cake substitute was delicious. I began to feel not that I was offering my tongue a consolation prize but rather that I was emerging, clearheaded, from under the influence. I lost a few pounds, which was not my aim, so I loaded ever more peanut butter onto grainy toast each morning. I made it through Halloween with only one detour into my daughter's candy haul, a mini Butterfinger, once my idea of heaven. The holidays reminded me how tightly peppermint and gingerbread are entwined with our celebrations. Four months ago, I would have thrown myself with abandon into the sugar orgy. I can't lie—I couldn't resist a tray piled high with toffee butter crunch, but afterward, I relapsed into that carb-coma and came out of it with a renewed sense of resolve.

Whether I'm addicted or my sugar devotion is more obsessive love, my body's turbulent chemistry will no longer allow the sweets my taste buds crave. The answer, as with everything, is balance and that novel concept: willpower. In the future, I want my lapses to be infrequent and worth it. I'll never pass up one perfect slice of my friend Sarah's chocolate cake with candy-fudge icing, which she bakes for me every birthday. And I'll still have all my teeth to sink into it. □

ADDING IT UP

Not all carbohydrates are created equal. Bogdanovics advises that, particularly for someone who exercises, 50 percent of the diet should consist of carbs as close as possible to their natural state—vegetables, fruits, whole grains (complex carbohydrates), or dairy products (containing lactose). Fiber and protein act as barriers to stall the rapid absorption of sugar into the bloodstream; that's why it's always preferable to eat the whole fruit and not just the juice, which is metabolized like soda.—M.D.

THE SIPPING POINT

Loving the effects of alcohol a little too much, Rebecca Johnson looks to limit—but not eliminate—her nightly glasses of wine.

My name is Rebecca J. I am not an alcoholic. What I am is a wine drinker. White, preferably, but as my wine-snob husband likes to say, "As long as it's fermented. . . ." He's actually wrong about that. I don't really like hard liquor, because I don't like to get drunk. What I like is wine's

long, slow slide to pleasantly buzzed. I like how it muffles the critical voice in my head, the one that rears its head at the cocktail hour, when all the petty irritations and insults of the day have come to rest like the sooty sediment in an ancient bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

And so it truly astonishes me that I was stupid enough to let my drinking get out of control. Reformed alcoholics (and remember, I am not one!) carry around a story about their drinking that is inevitably bookended by disaster. I knew I hit bottom, they say, when I ran over the family dog or woke up in bed with a guy who had a swastika tattooed on his neck. I don't have any stories like that. I knew I had to cut down for much more prosaic reasons—I couldn't sleep, I got tired of feeling vaguely lousy the next day, and, most important, I had the nagging sense that alcohol, once a boon companion I could take or leave, had settled in for a longtime stay. It was a rare evening I did not have at least two glasses of wine. On a good night, the level of wine would stay above the label. On a bad night, it would go below the bottom (occasionally two Tylenol the next morning).

At first, I tried to quit on my own. I didn't bother trying to abstain at social events—there's no way I could get through a party without a drink—but as a parent of two small children, I spend most of my nights at home anyway. I managed to grit my teeth through my usual drinking cues—making dinner, eating dinner, the *PBS NewsHour* on the sofa next to my husband—but when it came time to go to sleep, I would lie awake for hours, hoping in vain for oblivion. The pattern was inexorable. The wine helped me get to sleep. But then it woke me up at three in the morning, when I would find myself watching HGTV while eating Oreos to calm the sugar crash of the alcohol leaving my system. OK, that happened only one night, but the memory is seared into my neocortex.