

# The Vicious Cycle of Food Avoidance, Fear and Worsening Sensitivity

Written by: Wendy Busse, MSc, RD


It's easy to get caught up in trying to find the “perfect” diet to feel better. But this can often create confusion, frustration, and extra costs (like tests or supplements). It can also make food feel scary. Over time, this fear and restriction can turn into a vicious cycle – leading to a limited diet and more intense symptoms.

## What is Conditioned Food Sensitivity?

When the brain repeatedly associates certain foods with feeling unwell, the body may begin to react to those foods—even when the food itself is not causing physical damage or inflammation. This process is often described as *conditioned food sensitivity*.

Conditioned food sensitivity is not a medical diagnosis. Rather, it is a way of explaining how learned associations between foods and symptoms can develop through the mind–body connection. Viewing food sensitivity through this holistic lens can help broaden our understanding of how symptoms arise.

The ability for the brain to trigger reactions may sound questionable, but think of this lemon example:

	<p>Close your eyes and visualize cutting a lemon. Smell the citrus scent. Bring the lemon to your lips and squeeze a little juice on your tongue. Most people salivate when they do this visualization, demonstrating how the brain can create physical reactions based on associations.</p>
---	--

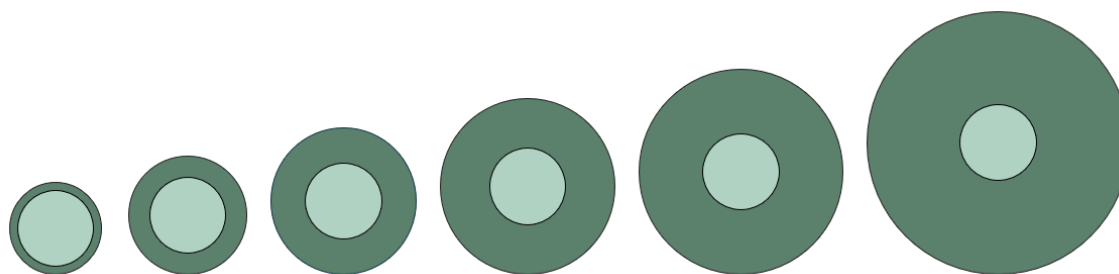
It is important to note that biological causes of food reactions can also occur, including food allergies, celiac disease, lactose intolerance and other disorders.

**The good news?** You can change your brain's *food-illness associations* and expand your diet!

## Is It All in My Head?

No, it is not in your head. Conditioned food sensitivity can produce real, physical symptoms—they are not imagined. That said, the brain plays an important role in this mind–body process. Some food sensitivities begin with a biological trigger, such as an illness, allergy, or disruption to digestion. Over time, stress, fear, and repeated negative experiences with food can increase the sensitivity of the nervous system, causing symptoms to feel more intense or occur more frequently.

This can create the impression that the body is becoming “sicker,” even when the underlying biological sensitivity remains relatively stable. In this way, the brain and nervous system can amplify symptoms through the mind–body connection, without those symptoms being “made up.”



Food sensitivities may start with a biological mechanism (light green), but over time, fear conditioning (dark green) can amplify symptoms.

## How Can I Improve My Relationship with Food?

Begin with small, compassionate shifts towards a better relationship with food. You don’t need to change everything at once. Here are a few simple ways to get started:

- **Don’t automatically blame food:** It’s natural to assume food is the cause of symptoms, but many other factors—such as stress, sleep quality, hormones, nutrient intake, and your body’s overall state—can also play a role. Try asking yourself, “*Could something other than food be affecting how I feel right now?*”
- **Support your body in the moment:** When you notice an uncomfortable sensation or thought, gently breathe into the experience with compassion. This may not make the sensation disappear, but it can help your body move through it while reducing the urge to worry, restrict, or search urgently for answers.
- **Revisit your restrictions:** Ask yourself: *Why did I start avoiding these foods? Am I following guidance that no longer applies to me?* Our bodies and food tolerances change over time, and your current needs may be different from the past.
- **Shift your focus:** Constantly scanning for what feels “safe” to eat can keep you stuck in a cycle of food fear. Instead, create a *Trusted Food List* to follow for the next few weeks, and use the mental space you gain for activities you enjoy.
- **Encourage an overall sense of safety:** Any activity that helps you feel grounded—such as breathing exercises, meditation, or spending time with loved ones—can support your body’s general feeling of safety. When your body feels safer overall, it becomes easier to feel safe around food as well.
- **Gradually expand your diet:** If your brain has learned to expect discomfort from certain foods, gradually reintroducing them—without the feared reaction occurring—can help break food–illness associations and rebuild trust in both your body and the foods you enjoy.

## Why Should I Expand My Diet?

Avoiding foods can feel safe, especially if you've had difficult experiences. Over time, however, gradually expanding your diet can open the door to meaningful benefits:

- **Feeling better** – Symptoms no longer dominate daily life
- **Improved mental wellbeing** – less worry and stress around food
- **Greater freedom** – Eating out, traveling, and socializing feel easier
- **More enjoyable meals** – Food becomes satisfying rather than stressful
- **Simpler routines** – Grocery shopping and cooking become less complicated
- **Better nutrition** – A wider variety of foods supports overall health
- **Increased tolerance** – Over time, your body can handle more foods

## How Can I Expand My Diet?

There is no single “right” way to expand your diet – everyone’s journey is different. However, these strategies can help guide the process.

- **Medical Assessment:** Begin by speaking with your medical doctor to clarify which foods are safe to reintroduce and to rule out conditions that require ongoing avoidance.
- **Be intentional:** Reintroducing foods with a clear, step-by-step plan helps you identify which foods your body tolerates and those that may still need more time.
- **Take it slow:** Gradual reintroduction gives your mind and body time to adapt. Small, steady steps build both tolerance and a sense of safety.
- **Start without eating your restricted foods:** You can begin by simply looking at, smelling, or touching a previously restricted food. These small exposures help reassure your brain that the food is safe and can be a gentle first step before eating it.
- **Mix new foods with something you already tolerate:** Try adding a small amount of a new food to something you already tolerate—such as a single blueberry in your usual smoothie. This helps your brain associate the new food with familiarity and safety.

## Further Resources

Here are some additional supports you may find helpful as you continue your healing journey.

- **Slow, Gentle Breathing Practices** – Techniques such as [Box Breathing](#) can help regulate your nervous system.
- **FAST Freedom Program** – A free, 6-week course to soften food fear and expand your diet, with an optional paid program. Learn more [here](#).
- **Mobile Apps:** Programs, such as Nerva or Regulora, help people improve their brain-gut connection.
- **Registered Dietitians** – A dietitian can help you create a simple, enjoyable eating plan and address barriers to food preparation.
- **Mental Health Professionals Specializing in Chronic Illness** – These experts can help you work through food-related fear, reduce stress, and build resilience.

## References

Busse W, Arriagada L, Volpato E, et al. Conditioned Food Avoidance and Sensitivity Theory (C-FAST)- A Novel Conceptual Framework to Understand Food Sensitivity Fear. *Neurogastroenterol Motil.* 2026;38(4):e70314. doi:10.1111/nmo.70314

Mikhael-Moussa H, Bertrand V, Lejeune E, et al. The Association of Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) and Neurogastroenterology Disorders (Including Disorders of Gut-Brain Interaction [DGBI]): A Scoping Review. *Neurogastroenterol Motil.* Published online March 30, 2025. doi:10.1111/nmo.70039

Weeks I, Abber SR, Thomas JJ, et al. The Intersection of Disorders of Gut-Brain Interaction With Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder. *J Clin Gastroenterol.* 2023;57(7):651-662. Published 2023 Aug 1. doi:10.1097/MCG.0000000000001853.

Hadamitzky M, Lückemann L, Pacheco-López G, Schedlowski M. Pavlovian Conditioning of Immunological and Neuroendocrine Functions. *Physiol Rev.* 2020;100(1):357-405. doi:10.1152/physrev.00033.2018.

de Graaf MCG, Lawton CL, Croden F, et al. The effect of expectancy versus actual gluten intake on gastrointestinal and extra-intestinal symptoms in non-coeliac gluten sensitivity: a randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled, international, multicentre study [published correction appears in *Lancet Gastroenterol Hepatol.* 2024 Mar;9(3):e8. doi: 10.1016/S2468-1253(24)00014-1]. *Lancet Gastroenterol Hepatol.* 2024;9(2):110-123. doi:10.1016/S2468-1253(23)00317-5.

Wu J, Masuy I, Biesiekierski JR, Fitzke HE, Parikh C, Schofield L, Shaikh H, Bhagwanani A, Aziz Q, Taylor SA, Tack J, Van Oudenhove L. Gut-brain axis dysfunction underlies FODMAP-induced symptom generation in irritable bowel syndrome. *Aliment Pharmacol Ther.* 2022 Mar;55(6):670-682. doi: 10.1111/apt.16812. Epub 2022 Feb 15. PMID: 35166384.