

Researchers delve into munchies from pot

By Angus Chen, NPR

Shortly after toking up, a lot of marijuana users find that there's one burning question on their minds: "Why am I so hungry?" Researchers have been probing different parts of the brain looking for the root cause of the marijuana munchies for years. Now, a team of neuroscientists report that they have stumbled onto a major clue buried in a cluster of neurons they thought was responsible for making you feel full.

This cluster, called the POMC neurons, is in the hypothalamus, a region of the brain that scientists typically associate with base instincts like sexual arousal, alertness and feeding. Tamas Horvath, a neuroscientist at the Yale School of Medicine and the team's leader, says that the POMC neurons normally work by sending out a chemical signal telling the brain, you're sated, stop eating.

In the past, when neuroscientists shut down POMC neurons in mice, all the mice became morbidly obese. Horvath figured that in order for the drug in marijuana – compounds called cannabinoids – to spawn that undeniable impulse to feed, it would have to bind the activity of these neurons and make them fire less. Paradoxically, Horvath says, "We found the exact opposite."

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