

ESSAY

How Curiosity Becomes a Habit: A Chain of Questions That Rebuilt My Diet

The actual record of two curiosity chains from the same stretch of weeks — one that started with 'is olive oil healthy?' and ended as a daily habit, and a second, in the middle of it, that started with the crust in my eyes and ran through half of human physiology before looping back to the same breakfast — and what I think they show about why understanding-driven change sticks.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Written by Claude (Anthropic). Directed and edited by me, [Aaron Holbrook](#). Educational only — not financial, legal, or tax advice. Sources are listed at the end.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Both curiosity chains I describe here happened in conversations with an AI model, and I wrote this report with one too. None of it is medical, nutritional, or health advice; my outcomes are a single uncontrolled case — just me.

It started with a dumb question — is olive oil actually good for you? — and a few more like it. I wasn't trying to change anything; I was just curious. But each answer pointed at the next one, and I kept coming back over a few weeks, and somewhere in there the questions quietly turned into a system: one prepped breakfast I now eat every day without thinking about it. In the middle of all of it I got curious about something completely unrelated — the crust in the corners of my eyes when I wake up — and that rabbit hole ran through half of human physiology and somehow ended right back at what I put in that same breakfast. I never decided to “go on a diet.” I understood my way into it, one question at a time, and three months later the changes are real and still here: blood pressure back to normal, about twenty pounds gone, off alcohol, no more blood-sugar crashes, full for hours, and the stomach trouble that used to be routine just gone.

This isn't really about the food. It's about what happens when curiosity becomes the habit. What follows is the actual record of two question-chains that ran during the same few weeks — the real questions I asked and the gist of the real answers, in order — and then what I make of them. I've labeled my claims the way I label everything: **[FACT]** is a sourced data point, **[CHARACTERIZATION]** is my own read on the facts (the reasoning is on hover), and **[PROJECTION]** is an “if X then Y,” never a prediction. The story parts are just me recounting what was said; the sourced claims are the tagged ones. And I've kept the private medical particulars out — what matters here is the shape of the thing.

The chain that built a habit

It opened with the kind of question anyone might idly ask:

“Is olive oil a healthy fat that helps HDL? What is LDL versus HDL? Is peanut butter unhealthy fat? What about walnuts? Is honey healthy in small amounts every day or no?”

The answers were reassuring and ordinary — yes to olive oil, LDL is the cholesterol that deposits in artery walls and HDL ferries it back to the liver, natural peanut butter is fine, walnuts are great, honey is just sugar in small doses. Nothing alarming. But asking turned my attention to what I was actually eating, so I volunteered my real routine — bread with peanut butter and honey before coffee — and asked the question that quietly changed everything: *should I stop any of these things?*

What pulled it from theory into my kitchen was a single object. I actually looked at the label on my peanut butter, and the next thing I said was:

“It’s Skippy Super Chunk. It has hydrogenated vegetable oil.”

That was the hinge. It stopped being about nutrition in the abstract and became an audit of the specific things on my specific shelves — this product versus that one, this label versus its alternative. One by one I looked at the components and swapped them: the peanut butter, the bread, the yogurt, the milk, the oils. The question kept its shape — *here’s a thing I actually use; is it the right version?* — and the answers kept finding a slightly better one.

Then one question reframed the whole project:

“What about doing some sort of cold overnight oatmeal type mixture? Rolled oats or something, like I’m making a parfait but a healthy one.”

That was the breakthrough, though it didn’t feel like one at the time. All the scattered upgrades had been circling a structure without naming it, and overnight oats was the container that could hold every one of them at once — oats, yogurt, milk, seeds, fruit, protein, all the improvements in a single prepped meal. From there I stopped branching outward and started building inward.

It didn’t happen cleanly or in a day. There was a bad morning on the old routine that ended in a shaky near-crash and forced the issue. There was a first batch that came out too dense, and a back-and-forth about whether to thin it with milk or water that I finally called out as me overthinking it. There were dozens of small returns — over *weeks*, not hours — to tweak a dose, fix a texture, check it against a week of logged data. And at some point it crossed the line from experiment to default. Near the end I caught myself still asking:

“Anything else I can add to the oats?”

— and the answer I needed to hear was: *no, the system is complete*. The thing that started with a stray question about olive oil had turned into a meal I eat every day without making a single decision.

The chain that proved the habit

Here's the part that makes this more than a diet story. *In the middle of those same weeks* — while I was still building the breakfast — I got curious about something with no connection to any of it:

“What is the accumulation of crust around the eyes after sleep? Physiologically what is it and why does it occur?”

It's called rheum — dried tear film, a mix of mucus, oil, watery tears, and shed cells that blinking normally clears, which pools at the lash line once you stop blinking overnight. Fine. Except the answer mentioned that fluid keeps being made while you sleep, and that opened the next gap:

“Do your eyes leak at night then?”

Not really — it keeps secreting at a lower rate, the watery part evaporates, the rest dries into crust. But where does the drained fluid actually *go*? That gave me one of those questions that sounds like a guess and turns out to be right:

“Does the tear duct drain into the nose and then back down into the stomach?”

Yes — the duct drains into the nose, it runs down the throat, you swallow it without noticing, and it ends up in your stomach; we swallow more than a liter of our own secretions a day. And that's when the small question became a big one:

“Then from the stomach it goes through the waste cycle? Fascinating. It goes from your eyes back into your system and gets recycled.”

That was the pivot. “Recycled” reframed my eye from a leaky faucet into one node in a body that reabsorbs almost everything it makes, and I chased that new frame outward — the lymphatic system, bile, the constant turnover of bone — and then upward, to the organ that seemed to break the rule:

“How does the brain work isn't there a barrier? How is it fed?”

The blood-brain barrier; glucose carried across by dedicated transporters. Which only sharpened the next one:

“Why glucose. What's so special about that?”

— and the answer’s mention of an energy currency made me ask the small, almost childish thing I realized I didn’t actually know:

“ATP?”

— and a passing remark that burning protein makes ammonia connected, for me, to something completely mundane:

“Wait, protein create ammonia? Is that why our urine is like ammonia?”

Exactly right. And the same chain kept walking — through caffeine, through what different things do to my body — until, with no plan and no prompting, it arrived right back at the breakfast the *other* chain had been building, and added one more thing to it. An idle question about eye crust had gone through tear ducts, the gut, the blood-brain barrier, glucose, and the urea cycle, and come home to a jar of oats.

What I think was actually going on

Two chains, started weeks apart from completely unrelated questions, ran the same way and ended in the same place. When I look at them now, the shape underneath is pretty clear.

Every answer made the next question

CENTRAL MECHANISM

What was driving me is something the psychologist George Loewenstein calls an information gap — curiosity kicks in when you become aware of a gap between what you know and what you want to know, and you feel that gap as a kind of itch you're driven to scratch. [FACT] It feeds itself: closing one gap shows you the edge of the next. You can see it right in my questions — every answer ended by naming something I didn't previously know to ask about (tears drain **where?**; the brain is fed **how?**; **why** glucose), and my next message was always exactly that gap. [CHARACTERIZATION]

It also explains why this stuck when so many of my past attempts to “be healthier” didn’t. When you’re genuinely curious, the brain’s dopamine reward circuit lights up — the same regions that respond to food and money — and that state actually improves memory, even for incidental stuff you pick up along the way. [FACT] Curiosity isn’t just wanting to know; it’s a reward state that makes whatever you learn in it stick harder. [CHARACTERIZATION]

Understanding beat willpower because it changed what I wanted, not just what I did

CENTRAL MECHANISM

The strange thing about all this is that it held for months and I never once white-knuckled it. That's the signature of a change you reach by understanding instead of by rules. In self-determination theory, behavior that's intrinsically motivated or internalized lasts longer and survives stress better than behavior driven by outside pressure, which falls apart the moment the pressure's gone. [FACT] Understanding **why**

salt raises blood pressure is exactly how the rule "eat less salt" turned into something I actually wanted — I just stopped wanting the thing that does that to me. [CHARACTERIZATION] A rule has to be obeyed against the pull of what you'd rather do, and that obedience runs out; an understanding doesn't have to be obeyed, because the other option stops appealing to you. [CHARACTERIZATION]

The weeks of coming back weren't a delay — they were the mechanism

IMPORTANT CONTEXT

I didn't adopt the breakfast; I repeated it into place. A behavior turns into a habit when you repeat it in a consistent context until it goes automatic; in the most-cited real-world study, that took anywhere from 18 to 254 days (median around 66), and missing one day didn't wreck it. [FACT] My stretched, on-and-off timeline — mostly front-loaded, then coming back to it again and again over weeks, always in the same morning slot — *is* the contextual repetition that research points to as the active ingredient.

[CHARACTERIZATION] And identity quietly locked it in: every repetition confirmed a sense of being someone who understands what this stuff does to him, so it started feeling like who I am rather than something I deny myself. [FACT] [CHARACTERIZATION]

And the second chain is what really convinces me. The first one had to be aimed, loosely, at food. The second was aimed at *nothing* — eye crust — and it still found its way home. By then the curiosity wasn't something I was switching on for a goal; it just ran, and it didn't care what the subject was.

[CHARACTERIZATION] The thing that had gone automatic wasn't only the diet. It was the asking.

Why I think the changes actually work

I should be careful here, because this is the part where it would be easy to overclaim. I changed a lot of things at once — what I eat, alcohol, sleep, exercise — so I genuinely can't tell you which change moved which number. The mechanisms below are *general* and well established; they explain why changes like mine *can* do what mine seem to have done. They don't prove they did it for me.

It's one uncontrolled case — mine

LIMIT OF THE EVIDENCE

One person changing many things at once and feeling better is, by definition, an uncontrolled n-of-1.

[CHARACTERIZATION] I'm including the mechanisms because each one is established in controlled research, not because my experience proves any of it.

Lower blood pressure, from less sodium. In randomized trials, cutting dietary sodium lowers blood pressure roughly in proportion to the cut, more so if you start higher; processed and cured meats are some of the densest sodium sources, so eating fewer of them is a concrete way down. [FACT] [FACT]

[PROJECTION]

Fullness and weight, from protein. The protein-leverage idea is that we keep eating until we hit a protein target, so a protein-rich diet hits it sooner and total intake falls — which is a mechanism for “full for hours on fewer calories” that doesn't take willpower. [FACT] [CHARACTERIZATION]

Steadier blood sugar, from what's in the meal and the order I eat it. In controlled studies, eating protein and vegetables before carbs sharply lowers the post-meal glucose and insulin spike versus the other order, by slowing digestion and bumping gut hormones; more protein and soluble fiber flattens the same spikes. **[FACT]** **[CHARACTERIZATION]**

Lower cholesterol, from soluble fiber. The beta-glucan in oats lowers LDL; meta-analyses of controlled trials find a reliable drop at around 3 grams a day — that's the basis of an official health claim — and a daily oat breakfast delivers it. **[FACT]** **[CHARACTERIZATION]**

Easier on my stomach, from acid timing. Coffee ramps up stomach-acid secretion, and drinking it on an empty stomach removes the food buffer that would blunt the acid against the lining, which can aggravate irritation if you're prone to it; eating first puts the buffer back. **[FACT]** **[CHARACTERIZATION]**

What I take from it

Let me be precise about the lesson, because it's narrow. My story does *not* prove a diet works, or that my changes caused my outcomes, or that anyone should eat or skip anything — it's one uncontrolled case, which is exactly why I kept every effect claim above at the level of general mechanism.

What it does show me is a process. Curiosity, left to run, compounds into understanding; understanding is a sturdier base for behavior than rules, because it changes what you want instead of fighting it; and a thing you come back to again and again, in the same daily slot, eventually goes automatic. The first chain walked me from a question about cooking fat to a daily habit without a single act of willpower. The second one taught me the deeper thing: once you've followed enough questions, the *following* is the habit — it doesn't care about the subject. A curiosity that started with olive oil and a curiosity that started with eye crust ran the identical course and ended in the same kitchen, weeks apart, and I aimed neither of them at what it produced. **[CHARACTERIZATION]**

So the takeaway isn't "be more disciplined." It's that the changes most likely to stick might be the ones you back into by understanding something well enough that the old way stops making sense — and that curiosity, the cheapest and most renewable thing I've got, is the engine that produces that understanding, and that if you run it enough, it stops needing to be switched on. **[CHARACTERIZATION]**

Defined terms

automatic

Running on its own with little conscious effort — the defining feature of a habit, versus a choice you make fresh each time.

information gap

The idea that curiosity is triggered by a perceived gap between what you know and what you want to know, felt as a mild deprivation you're motivated to close.

internalized

Taking an outside rule and turning it into a reason you actually hold yourself, so the behavior is self-endorsed instead of enforced.

Sources

My analytical and mechanistic claims — the curiosity and behavior-change findings, and each dietary mechanism — I checked against primary research and authoritative secondary sources in June 2026. The conversation I recount is just that — a recounting of what was said in it; my personal outcomes are self-reported and uncontrolled, and I don't treat them as evidence anywhere in the body.

Curiosity and learning

- [Loewenstein, G. \(1994\) — *The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Reinterpretation*, *Psychological Bulletin* 116\(1\):75–98](#) — the information-gap account: curiosity as deprivation from a perceived gap in knowledge
- [Gruber, Gelman & Ranganath \(2014\) — *States of Curiosity Modulate Hippocampus-Dependent Learning via the Dopaminergic Circuit*, *Neuron* 84\(2\):486–496](#) — curious states activate the dopaminergic reward circuit and improve memory, including for incidental material

Behavior change and habit formation

- [Ryan & Deci \(2000\) — *Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being*, *American Psychologist* 55\(1\):68–78](#) — intrinsic/internalized motivation is more persistent than externally compelled motivation; the internalization concept
- [Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts & Wardle \(2010\) — *How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world*, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40\(6\):998–1009](#) — time-to-automaticity of 18–254 days (median ~66); one missed day did not derail formation
- [James Clear — *Identity-Based Habits: How to Actually Stick to Your Goals*](#) — durable habits as expressions of identity, self-reinforcing rather than willpower-dependent (popular synthesis)

Dietary mechanisms (general, not specific to my case)

- [He, Li & MacGregor — *Effect of longer-term modest salt reduction on blood pressure* \(*Cochrane / BMJ*; PMC7190039\)](#) — approximately linear sodium–blood-pressure relationship, larger effect at higher baseline
- [Raubenheimer & Simpson \(2023\) — *Protein appetite as an integrator in the obesity system: the protein leverage hypothesis*, *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* \(PMC10475875\)](#) — humans defend a protein target and over-consume energy when protein is diluted
- [Shukla et al. \(2015\) — *Food Order Has a Significant Impact on Postprandial Glucose and Insulin Levels*, *Diabetes Care* 38\(7\):e98–e99](#) — protein/vegetables before carbohydrate sharply lowers post-meal glucose and insulin

- Ho et al. (2016) — *The effect of oat β -glucan on LDL-cholesterol... a meta-analysis of randomised-controlled trials*, British Journal of Nutrition 116(8):1369–1382 — ~3 g/day oat beta-glucan significantly lowers LDL cholesterol
- Zhong et al. / Annals of Internal Medicine systematic reviews and dose-response cohort meta-analysis (PMC10270853) — processed meat consistently associated with higher cardiovascular and mortality risk; unprocessed-red-meat association weaker and contested
- Boekema et al. — *Coffee and gastrointestinal function: facts and fiction. A review* (PubMed 10499460) — coffee stimulates gastric acid secretion; empty-stomach consumption removes the food buffer