Powerball: That fever you're feeling has a name: dopamine

By Natalie Jacewicz and Emily Benson | Staff writers

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That lottery fever sweeping the country in anticipation of Saturday night's record $900 million Powerball drawing? Scientists have a name for it: dopamine.

It’s the brain chemical associated with reward, pleasure and addiction. And it’s digging into Californians' pockets at a maddening pace this week when the state lottery expects to sell $60 million in Powerball tickets — 10 times what it sells on a typical week.

Thanks a lot, dopamine. Whether the jackpot is $9 million or $900 million, the odds of winning are stuck at a buzzkilling one in 292 million.

"I don't want to miss a big chance," said Javier Berec as he plunked down $10 for five tickets Friday at Hana's Bottle Shop Liquors in Santa Clara, billed as one of the California lottery's "historical lucky retailers," thanks to selling two $1 million tickets in 2011 within three months.

With $900 million up for grabs, it doesn't take a neuroscientist like Howard Fields to explain how Californians may be ignoring probability this week because of the way the brain processes risk and reward.

"In the brain stem of a gambler, dopamine neurons are firing very high, pushing them to put out the money, to go and buy the ticket," said Fields, a professor of neurology at UC San Francisco.

During pleasurable experiences, dopamine floods the brain and urges humans to repeat the bliss-blasting behavior.

But, Fields added, the brain tends to overestimate the possibility of reward.
A guy just bought $200 in Powerball,” Patel said. And, of course, like any lab rat, we are more likely to take that chance as the reward -- in this case, an $900 million piece of cheese -- overruling the more cautious part of the brain. And once people decide to play, they often spend more than they anticipated.

What drives customers to dig so deep in their wallets while standing at the counter? Stanford professor Brian Knutson and his colleagues recently discovered a connection between an area of excitement, the nucleus accumbens, and another area related to caution known as the anter -- overruling the anticipated.

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Many people grinned as they imagined what they would do with the money they knew they won -- or not.

"It's just fun," said Barbara Meyers, who plays the lottery three times a week. Unlike most players, Meyers said she wouldn't want to receive the winnings in a lump sum.

Cupertino residents Fernando Craff and his wife, Virginia, grew animated when they talked about donating the proceeds to charities in Peru, and shrugged off the long odds.

Meyers' ambitions highlight one more motivation driving lottery purchasers: the gratification of helping others. "I think you might get too greedy if you take it all at once," Meyers said, adding that she would help the poor with her winnings.

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I must be real low on dopamine. I have never bought a lottery ticket.

Matthew Sullivan • 4 days ago

It's called rigged!

itbethetruth • Matthew Sullivan • 4 days ago

Your talking about election’s

If dopamine neuron firing normally overestimates the probability of reward we and our forebears would not have survived as species. It must be an unhea

horatio • 4 days ago

Is that supposed to be a pun? If not lets just call it what it really is dumbamine!
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