

Can we control our appetites?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you graze on food throughout the day?
- At a buffet or bbq, do you return a second or third time to refill your plate?
- In a restaurant, do you always order too much?

If you have answered yes to the above, you may have poor coping strategies in an environment where food is constantly available. MRC Human Nutrition Research has taken a closer look at this area to investigate how appetite and food intake is controlled. Published in this month's International Journal of Obesity, the study found that in an environment of plenty, some people will be unable to restrain themselves from eating too much.

Six participants in the study had a healthy body weight and had no history of dieting. The study involved purposefully overfeeding the participants with 20% more food than usual for 3 weeks. They were then allowed to eat as much or as little as they wished over the next week. This was repeated with 40% more food and later 60% overfeeding on two further occasions.

Weight gain was similar in all subjects during the overfeeding periods. Body fat increased by an average of 13% and levels of the fullness hormone leptin increased by 116%. However when allowed to eat freely, the subjects responded differently. In spite of biological signals indicating fullness most subjects continued to eat most of the food provided, at least until the massive 60% overfeeding period.

Only two participants restricted their food and succeeded in losing weight during the free eating periods. At the end of the entire study, net weight gain ranged from 4-8kg.

Commenting on the study, lead author Dr Susan Jebb said, "This study shows that some people are more predisposed to over eat than others. We cannot rely on biological mechanisms to remain lean. In an environment where food is plentiful, consumers need to be encouraged to watch what they eat to avoid inadvertent weight gain".

Some strategies to help with your behaviour and avoid the over eating pitfalls are:

- Write down what you eat
- Go to the buffet table only once. Chew your food slowly and focus on the conversation not the food
- Decide what type of food you will order before going into the restaurant and stick to it.
- Fill your plate with low energy foods such as vegetables

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