

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FOOD BEHAVIOUR



dietflex



Most people are aware of internal factors influencing what and how much we eat: hunger or satiety, favourite or unpleasant flavours, and the nutrient content of food all influence what and how much we eat at different times. There's more to it than just eating because we're hungry. But what about the external factors which influence our eating behaviours?

CULTURAL AND FAMILY FACTORS

Role modelling by parents influences the eating behaviours of children and sets up their eating patterns, often for life. Parents who eat vegetables are more likely to influence kids to eat vegies. Vegetarian parents are more likely to influence their children to be vegetarian. A family with traditional cultural meal patterns will develop those same patterns in their children.

ADVERTISING

Some advertising provides knowledge about the importance of nutritional elements, such as vitamins and minerals. They can also give us inaccurate information.

Advertising can be persuasive in ways we don't recognise as applying to ourselves, so we can let our guard down. Often advertising associates a product with something we feel positively towards, for example a celebrity, sports person or a baby, which can influence us to transfer our positive feelings from one thing to another.

Advertising slogans appeal to people's emotions. Specific slogans or jingles stay in people's minds long after the advertisement is over and can, consciously or not, influence buying decisions.

But it's not just advertisements you need to worry about in the media. News headlines are also crafted to be sensational. Psychologists now know that news triggers the emotional part of our brain which is, of course, largely uncontrollable. This is why when a newscaster talks about the latest and greatest diet, you inevitably feel an impulse to try it out.

PACKAGING

Food manufacturers have the goal to sell more of their food. To do this, it must taste good and be attractively packaged. The taste of food is 'enhanced' often by a cocktail of additives, flavours and/or chemicals, and often with the addition of sugar. Packaging will make claims about the food, be it taste (and other senses), nutrition or lifestyle. Words and images are used to appeal to senses other than taste – after all, it's impossible to put the actual taste of the food into an ad or on a package.

Packaging influences our behaviour via the 'halo effect'. For example, people tend to perceive 'organic' as good, so organic deep-fried chips creates the perception that they are healthy even though they have just as many calories and as little nutritional value as conventional chips. As a result, people consume more overall calories when a food is labeled with a health claim than when there is no label at all.

NUTRITION INFORMATION

The messages we see and hear in advertising and packaging influence our choices, and in both negative and positive ways. Nutrition information is on the packaging in accordance with Australian laws, and provides specific information about the macro-nutrient content of the food.

Where specific nutritional claims have been made, exact information to support those claims must also be made. For example, a product claiming to be 'a good source of Vitamin C' must have the amount of Vitamin C on the nutrition panel.

RESTAURANTS AND EATING OUT

In social situations when eating as a group, more often than not we forget about the quality of the food we are eating, especially if we are drinking as well. We often start the meal with bread, and then move on to a variety of selections.

At home, most of us prepare one meal for the whole family, so there is a single choice. Think about a Wednesday night at home: the choice is steak and vegies or whatever is on the menu at your house.

When we eat out, a la carte restaurants are best as the menu gives options but you can choose only one, thus eating only the one meal.

Smorgasbords can be diabolical. There are choices of soups, hot and cold mains, and a variety of desserts. Too often people go back for seconds, thirds and so on, dramatically exceeding their body's nutritional needs, simply so that they "get their money's worth" and "have a little taste of everything".

CONVENIENCE AND AVAILABILITY

The availability and convenience of fast foods encourages people to eat more food on-the-go. Fast food places not only function as a convenience, but also as a trigger. They promote excess food intake, and large portions of food with poor nutritional value. If this occurs on a regular basis, weight gain ensues.

Often where there is one fast food outlet, there are a number. The companies have identified 'hot spots' where the demographic or passing traffic increases the potential profits to be made, but which ultimately gives the consumer a range of choices. These choices make the location more family friendly and increase the number of times people purchase food.

PORTION SIZE

"Clean up your plate - there are starving kids in Africa" was a common phrase for many of us growing up. Our parents were unconsciously telling us to ignore our internal signals and instead rely on the amount served on the plate to determine the portion we needed.

A bag of crisps is a single serve, right? A look at the nutrition panel may tell you that the bag is intended to serve two or even three people. The reason for this is so that the nutrition 'per serve' will look better, and in some cases so that the manufacturer can make nutrition claims about the food (eg less than 100 calories, low in fat etc).

We become accustomed to a particular size plate when eating at home, and we tend to fill the plate. This is usually done with no thought given to our internal cues - "Am I hungry?" "How much do I need to eat right now?"

Round plates with a thin border encourage us to eat more while square plates with a wide border encourage us to eat less. Compare a shallow bowl to a deep bowl when serving food - which will make you eat more? The shallow bowl will be full with less food, and regardless of bowl size you'll often stop eating after just the single bowl.

SOCIALISING

Our focus is usually on the company rather than the food, so we eat mindlessly while giving our full attention to the conversation.

Being a 'good host' often means providing more food and drink, and often more courses, than people would normally eat, and being a 'good guest' means going along with it. When a meal is served by someone else, we are more likely to eat everything, even if we don't like the food or if we've had enough, for fear of offending.

CONSUMPTION NORMS

External factors affect our eating behaviours by interfering with consumption norms or disrupting our ability to monitor how much we have eaten.

For many people deciding how much to eat or drink is a burden, so instead of spending too much time thinking about it, they instead rely on consumption norms to help when choosing how much to eat. Consumption may be influenced by how much one typically buys or consumes, and suggests an optimal quantity.

External factors have been shown to bias one's estimate of how much they have eaten. A major determinant of how much one eats in a distracting environment is whether or not the person is trying to monitor their intake. Eating is a multidimensional process that is sometimes difficult to monitor. This can lead to individuals focusing more on food choice than food volume.

SUMMARY

We know that the vast array of factors which influence our eating patterns can make it difficult to monitor not only what we eat but also how much.

Many external and environmental factors lead us to focus more on food choices than on amounts. Training ourselves to become consciously aware of food and the environment can help to bring our focus back to our internal signals of hunger and satiety.

Monitoring food and drink intake through pre-planning and then keeping an accurate record of everything we've consumed for the day is one of the most important tools for re-developing this internal focus. Paying attention to the signals your body is giving, if you can recognise them, is another essential component to re-learning how to tune in to your internal cues and start avoiding some of the external and environmental factors that can sabotage your weight loss efforts.

THIS WEEKS CHALLENGE:

Use an exercise book to record everything you eat for one day. Record who you're eating with, where you are, and your hunger level as well as what foods you eat.

NOTES

Lined area for taking notes, consisting of multiple horizontal lines.