



Eating on REPEAT

HEALTH BUZZ

NEW RESEARCH SUGGESTS A RESTRAINED, REGULATED APPROACH TO EATING IS THE KEY TO KEEPING WEIGHT IN CHECK. BY **KATRINA LAWRENCE**

I have a friend who eats the same lunch, day in, day out: a toasted cheese, avocado and tomato sandwich. I once asked her why she is so stuck in this cycle, when on her doorstep (well, office-step) is a plethora of takeout options, from Vietnamese rolls to Japanese udon to wholefood salad mixes. “It’s kind of my control mechanism when it comes to food,” she answered. “No matter where the day takes me, I know that I’m getting a certain serve of nutrition and it’s a good amount of energy to get me through the rest of the day.” (For the record, she always orders grainy bread and goat’s

cheese or feta, holding the butter, so her intake of saturated fats and refined carbs is minimal.)

Some think my toastie-loving friend a little obsessive. But all of them acknowledge that she is enviably slender. Could one of her stay-slim secrets be this Groundhog-Day style lunch? That’s what I wondered when I read recent research published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* which examined the process of “habituation” to food and what it might mean for weight control. (Habituation is where repeated exposure to a stimulus results in a decrease in response to that stimulus.)

In the study, one group of women ate macaroni cheese five times in one week; the other group consumed the dish once per week for five weeks. The findings: those who had macaroni cheese for five days straight experienced faster habituation and, in turn, a lower kilojoule intake. In other words, if we're accustomed to certain food, and know we're able to eat it regularly, we're less likely to overindulge.

Food for thought, right? We're constantly advised to eat a wide variety of foods and certainly in our brave new culinary world everything is at our disposal. But while that might be good news for our tastebuds, is it a different story for our waistlines?

"We're saturated by food choice these days and over-stimulated when it comes to food decisions," says nutritionist Zoe Bingley-Pullin (nutritionledge.com.au). "We look at food as a coping mechanism and emotionalise it to the point where we not only eat too much of it, but often feel let down and unsatisfied by it. For that reason, it could be a good idea to be more routine with food. Sometimes we need to realise that what we eat is about getting from A to B, that food is as much medicine as pleasure and therefore we should eat to fuel ourselves to get through the day."

In contrast to the less-than-healthy macaroni-cheese lunch used for research purposes, Bingley-Pullin suggests putting some boundaries around an eating regimen by having two or three nutritious breakfasts on rotation. "Be organised and always have well-balanced options on hand," she says, recommending grainy toast topped with egg or salmon, and avocado, spinach and tomato, or Bircher muesli mixed with berries, nuts and seeds. "You could also get some control into your lunch choices by cooking extra at night and having the leftovers the next day," she says. "I often make soup for dinner and take the remainder into the office for lunch. I don't have to think about what to eat and I know it ticks all the nutritional boxes. Because that's the thing with a balanced diet – it's not about having a huge amount of variety in your diet, it's about balancing your protein, fat, fibre, antioxidants and carbohydrates in what you decide to eat."

Donna Aston, health expert and author of *The End of Dieting* (Hardie Grant, \$29.95), is not as enthusiastic about the concept of limiting food choices. "One of the main reasons people go off a regimen is because they feel restricted," Aston says. "So if you're forcing yourself to have the same food every single day, how long will you do that before you're bored of it?" Aston prefers to put structure and routine into a diet through other means. "Limit your portion sizes and eat regular meals at specific times rather than leaving food as an afterthought for when you're hungry," she advises.

Nutritionist Marieke Rodenstein (thenutritionpractice.com.au) is concerned for a different reason. "In order to achieve and maintain good health we need to ingest a wide array of nutrients on a daily basis and this can only be achieved through a variety of foods," she says. "In fact, it has been theorised that humans evolved to seek out and respond to food variety because this predicted capacity for survival." So what is the definition of

variety? "Research suggests that an intake of more than 12 foods, from a spectrum of food groups, in one day usually characterises a diet adequate in essential nutrients," says Rodenstein. "Given the foods are whole and not junk!"

Rodenstein does concede that limiting food choice might be an effective strategy in the short-term. "If you need to lose some weight it's important to have boundaries in terms of what and how much you eat," she says. "And for some people, eating the same calorie-controlled meals every day may make it easier."

In the longer-term, eating the same lunch, or even breakfast or dinner, every day, will certainly take discipline. In

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fact, a study published recently by the American Psychological Association, which examined 50 years of data, has shown that people with a conscientious personality tend to be leaner, in contrast to those displaying impulsive traits, who are more likely to be overweight.

"Impulsive people tend to react to blood sugar levels," notes Bingley-Pullin. "If you continually react to cravings then it's easy to fall into a vicious cycle of unhealthy eating." Bingley-Pullin adds that impulsive people tend to be emotional eaters. "I tell my clients to keep a food diary and list what they eat and how they feel. It can give you great insight into where you're going wrong and help you take control of your health."

Aston agrees that impulsive personalities can learn to become more controlled. "The most important thing is to recognise what your triggers for unhealthy eating are," she says. "Then remove yourself from the situation and take a few deep breaths before you let stress start affecting your behaviour and food choices." Interestingly, researchers at the California Institute of Technology have found that making the best food choice is as simple as taking some time to consider its healthiness. In doing so, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex part of the brain "switches on", and this in turn helps us to exhibit more self-control than we would have if we had only thought about the tastiness of the food, which would have been processed in another part of the brain.

"It's crucial to consider the health implications of food," says Aston. "Unfortunately, it's sometimes hard to know what's best as there's so much conflicting information out there." Her top advice? "It's about getting back to basics. If food is unprocessed, if you eat a lot of colour, if you mix some lean protein with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, you're there. We have to stop looking for the magic carpet ride to weight loss. It's about eating real food – this is the real way to get control back of our weight and our life."

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