



MEDICAL REVIEW

By Kate Lahive

The tempting time

CHRISTMAS is fast approaching and with it comes the temptation to overindulge in party treats and endless festive feasts. But for some people, the pull of food is felt throughout the year.

Overeating is akin to drug addiction for obese people, new research suggests. Scans on overweight people revealed the regions of the brain that controlled the feeling of being full were the same as those in drug addicts craving drugs, according to New York researchers.

You don't have to be overweight or obese to struggle with food addictions. Not being able to say no to that second or third helping can be associated with more than just satisfying a rumbling stomach. Sources close to Janet Jackson, newly svelte after losing 60 pounds, say that she began overeating to cope with her brother Michael's child molestation trial in 2005.

"People aren't addicted to food in the same way as drugs but the emotional trigger is similar," says psychotherapist Sophie Boss.

"People turn to drugs, alcohol and food to zone out, avoid facing their feelings and to comfort themselves. There are few foods that have a chemical effect on the body that make you crave the food more."

We may push the celery to the side and crave calorific treats for comfort but there's

Christmas can be hard for people with food addictions

more to overeating than tantalising our taste buds and filling our stomachs.

"The first step in dealing with overeating is admitting the real problem," says Boss.

"Stress, anger, anxiety, upset... Whatever it is, food is the obvious short-term way of coping - it's cheap, available and doesn't impact on anybody. Sadly, most people feel doubly bad after indulging because they still have the problem they were avoiding and they're beating themselves up about overeating."

Before you raid the fridge for food, Boss advises exploring your head for some answers first.

"Try to work out what the triggers are that make you overeat and then try to manage them," she says. "There's no quick fix, easy solution."

"Don't tell yourself not to eat something - rules were made to

be broken. But before you raid the biscuit tin, pause for a few minutes and think about it. After practising this for a while, you might find you really don't want those biscuits anyway."

Unlike many harmful addictions like cigarettes, drugs and alcohol, those 'addicted' to food have to overcome their cravings every time they sit at the dinner table.

"Unlike giving up a habit like smoking, food is essential for life and so can never be given up," says public health dietician Rachel Cooke.

Faddy diets aren't the answer for those who overeat either.

"A common problem we see as dieticians is that people who are overweight go on a traditional restrictive diet and cut absolutely everything out. They lose the weight, come off the diet and then all the weight quickly goes back on because behaviours haven't been changed."

"To decrease weight healthily people need to think long-term and look at why and when they eat, and also why they choose the food they do."

"Strategies need to be developed and put in place for when old eating patterns return or when, for example, the chocolate cravings kick in."

So how do you control the urge to over indulge?



Indulgence: There are many foods around at Christmastime to make dieting or restraining harder

Hitting the gym or swotting up on dieting guidebooks is not the solution if overeating is a problem.

"Diet and activity on their own don't work, one of the key things is behaviour change," Cooke says.

"It's not so much an addiction with foods, but the cravings that people need to

break. If someone eats chocolate everyday for instance, or never eats breakfast, their body will be accustomed to that. Your body very much gets used to what you throw at it."

"To break a behaviour or craving you have to put the change in place for a period of one month; at least 21-28 days to get your body to accept it as 'normal'. Either cut something out or try weaning yourself off gradually, beginning by eating that food every other day."

If you're struggling with a food addiction, you can take action and start a healthy eating pattern. Boss has this advice for turning around your munching habits: "The more we are in touch with our bodies and understand our physical sensations, emotions and thoughts when we tune into them, the easier it is to identify situations that trigger us to overeat and tempt us into dieting mentality. Awareness is 50 per cent change."

The best way to avoid gaining weight is to eat when

you are physically hungry. Learn how to do this and overcome the practical obstacles that stand in the way of eating when we are hungry.

Deprivation leads to cravings and bingeing - it has been scientifically proven. By knowing that everything is allowed you actually have a chance to choose healthy foods if you want to, without feeling deprived.

When you sit down, you are acknowledging to yourself that you are eating. If you eat on the go or while doing a thousand other things you miss the experience. You are then likely to eat more and you will miss the signals which let you know when you've had enough. If eating is the activity you are much less likely to binge, graze, nibble or pick.

Knowing when to stop is vital. If you are hungry to start with, your body will let you know just how much is enough. This is how you learn to stop overeating. Learn the difference between being satisfied and full.



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Women in Sheffield to trial a new contraceptive pill with a natural hormone

NEW natural oestrogen based contraceptive pill is now undergoing the final stages of evaluation in four major cities in the UK. Women in London, Edinburgh, Newcastle and Sheffield are being invited to take part in the study to verify the benefits of the first major innovation in contraception since the introduction of the pill in the 1960s.

The new pill contains the oestrogen estradiol (E2) which is identical to the one naturally present in the woman's body. Currently available contraceptive pills use synthetic oestrogens and are based on a formula dating back to the 1960s. This new pill also contains NOMAC, a hormone new in contraception that resembles the progesterone a woman's body produces at certain times in her menstrual cycle. In studies undertaken so far, the pill has been shown to be well tolerated and effective in preventing the release of an egg from the ovaries (ovulation) and is

thus expected to be effective in prevention of pregnancy. It is hoped the new pill could provide benefits in terms of acceptability and tolerability. The aim of the new study is to find out if this is the case.

"This is an exciting study, and we're pleased to be taking part" said Dr. Salmon Omokanye, consultant in contraception & reproductive health care and lead clinician at the Central Health Clinic, Sheffield.

"As the latest statistics from the Department of Health show, the number of unwanted pregnancies in the UK is continuing to rise, so it's incredibly important that we continue to look for new contraception choices."

Women interested in trying this new contraceptive pill as part of the study may be eligible if they are:

■ Sexually active and in need of contraception

- Willing to use a pill for 12 months
- At least 18 but not older than 50 years
- In good physical and mental health
- For further information about taking part in this study please call 0114 2716800 or e-mail Salmon.Omokanye@sheffieldpct.nhs.uk.



The University of Sheffield.

INVITATION TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

The Human Nutrition Unit regularly runs research projects looking at the effect of food and drink on risk of disease.

If you are interested in helping us with our research then please contact us. We will then register you on our database and send you information about our studies. You will not be obliged to take part in any of the studies if you do not wish to.

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