

Home is where the healthy meal is

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Can a cozy dining table and nice music prompt people to reach for the greens and go light on dessert?

So suggests a new study probing why people tend to eat more-nutritious meals at home than away from home. The findings, based on data from 160 women who reported their emotional states before and after meals, add to mounting evidence that [psychological factors](#) may help override humans' wired-in preference for high-fat, [sugary foods](#).

"Over the course of evolution in a world of food scarcity, humans and animals alike have been biologically programmed to elicit more powerful [food reward](#) responses to high-caloric foods" than to less-fattening fare, the study notes. Given those hard-wired urges, it may not be enough to understand that broccoli is better for the [waistline](#) than [French fries](#). Home is known to be where people feel most content, and the positive emotions often associated with home-cooked meals may be part of the recipe for a [healthy diet](#), the researchers indicate.

The findings, published in the July issue of the [American Journal of Clinical Nutrition](#), suggest that people who are in a good mood at home tend to prepare healthier meals – and feel more emotionally rewarded after eating them. That cycle of positive reinforcement was more pronounced at home than elsewhere.

The report, by Prof. Ji Lu of Nova Scotia Agricultural College, Catherine Huet, and Prof.. Laurette Dubé of McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management, concludes that "the home is a

privileged environment that nurtures healthy eating and in which healthier food choices trigger and are triggered by more positive emotions."

This pattern may help explain why people make better choices at home than when eating out, says Prof. Dubé, senior author of the study and scientific director of the McGill World Platform for Health and Economic Convergence.

One limitation of the study is that all 160 participants were non-obese, white English-speaking women. Samples that vary in sex and culture, as well as samples that include children and obese populations, will be needed to demonstrate the extent to which the results can be generalized, the authors caution.

Even so, the findings provide insights that point toward novel strategies to encourage healthy eating, they conclude. Such strategies could rely on factors such as "interpersonal communications, home design and atmospheric cues" including "music, dining landscape, and kitchen equipment, which have all been found to induce positive emotions in both everyday and laboratory contexts."

Provided by McGill University

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