

Food memories may aid weight loss, researchers say

March 8 2013, by Mary Macvean

Dieters may want to forget episodes of falling off the wagon, but researchers say an attentive memory for what is eaten could help people eat less at their next meals.

So sitting at a movie with a bucket of popcorn holding perhaps a day's worth of [calories](#) might be a bad idea for the present and the future, the research in the [American Journal of Clinical Nutrition](#) suggests. In an analysis of 24 studies, the researchers found that while distractions can lead to increased eating, that distraction is even more influential on later eating.

The key is memory, said the researchers, who are from several British institutions. And the appeal could be that incorporating "attentive-eating principles" into people's habits could help with [weight loss](#) and maintenance "without the need for conscious calorie counting."

The current studies differed from other strategies in use, such as eating slowly and mindfulness training by focusing on studies that manipulated attention to food and memory, the researchers noted.

While the studies suggest the possibility of one approach to weight control, they mostly looked at adults whose [body mass index](#) measured in the healthy range, so additional work would be needed to discover the effect on people who are overweight.

[Distractions](#) can disrupt a person's ability to notice the [pleasure](#) of the

food going in, and that can lead to eating more than necessary. But that doesn't explain what happened at subsequent meals—a more pronounced increase in intake, the researchers said.

They found that enhancing memory of food consumed reduced later intake.

"However, it is not clear what aspects of memory are important," the researchers wrote. "Vividness of memory [imagery](#), memory for food eaten, and memory of calories consumed were all associated with changes to [food intake](#)."

They also said that if the last meal was remembered as filling and satisfying, it inhibits future intake.

As anyone who has tried to lose weight knows, it's a complicated business. And the researchers noted some complicating factors:

For example, eating alone may be less distracting than eating with other people. But eating with others has benefits, such as helping a family adopt healthy habits. So the advice might be better to avoid TV or the computer while eating, they said.

In experiments, researchers found that cuing or enhancing food memories led to eating less at the meal. They noted, however, that that might not be so easy to do in ordinary life and said strategies need to be developed to use this knowledge.

Similarly, keeping food wrappers and other cues of what's consumed also can help with food memories. But it might mean a rather unpleasant dining table.

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