'Food environments' affect what people eat. How you can change yours to support healthier eating

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In January, many people are setting new year's resolutions around healthy eating. Achieving these is often challenging—it can be difficult

to change our eating habits. But healthy diets can enhance [physical](#) and [mental health](#), so improving what we eat is a worthwhile goal.

One reason it's difficult to change our eating habits relates to our "[food environments](#)." This term [describes](#):

"The collective physical, economic, policy and sociocultural surroundings, opportunities and conditions that influence people's food and beverage choices and nutritional status."

Our current food environments are designed in ways that often make it easier to choose [unhealthy foods](#) than healthy ones. But it's possible to change certain aspects of our personal food environments, making eating healthier a little easier.

Unhealthy food environments

It's not difficult to find fast-food restaurants in Australian cities. Meanwhile, there are [junk foods](#) at supermarket checkouts, service stations and sporting venues. Takeaway and packaged foods and drinks routinely come in [large portion sizes](#) and are often considered tastier than healthy options.

Our food environments also provide us with various prompts to eat unhealthy foods via the media and advertising, alongside [health and nutrition claims](#) and appealing marketing images on food packaging.

At the supermarket, unhealthy foods are often promoted through prominent displays and price discounts.

We're also exposed to various situations in our everyday lives that can make [healthy eating](#) challenging. For example, social occasions or work functions might see large amounts of unhealthy food on offer.

Not everyone is affected in the same way

People differ in the degree to which their food consumption is influenced by their food environments.

This can be due to biological factors (for example, genetics and hormones), psychological characteristics (such as decision making processes or personality traits) and prior experiences with food (for example, learned associations between foods and particular situations or emotions).

People who are more susceptible will likely eat more and eat more unhealthy foods than those who are more immune to the effects of food environments and situations.

Those who are more susceptible may pay greater attention to food cues such as advertisements and cooking smells, and feel a stronger desire to eat when exposed to these cues. Meanwhile, they may pay less attention to internal cues signaling hunger and fullness. These differences are due to a combination of biological and psychological characteristics.

These people might also be more likely to experience physiological reactions to food cues including changes in heart rate and increased salivation.

Other situational cues can also prompt eating for some people, depending on what they've learned about eating. Some of us tend to eat when we're tired or in a bad mood, having learned over time eating provides comfort in these situations.

Other people will tend to eat in situations such as in the car during the commute home from work (possibly passing multiple fast-food outlets along the way), or at certain times of day such as after dinner, or when

others around them are eating, having [learned associations](#) between these situations and eating.

Being in front of [a TV or other screen](#) can also prompt people to eat, eat unhealthy foods, or eat more than intended.

Making changes

While it's not possible to change wider food environments or individual characteristics that affect susceptibility to food cues, you can try to tune into how and when you're affected by food cues. Then you can restructure some aspects of your personal food environments, which [can help](#) if you're working towards healthier eating goals.

Although both meals and snacks are important for overall diet quality, [snacks are often unplanned](#), which means food environments and situations may have a greater impact on what we snack on.

Foods consumed as snacks are often sugary drinks, confectionery, chips and cakes. However, snacks can also [be healthy](#) (for example, fruits, nuts and seeds).

Try removing unhealthy foods, particularly packaged snacks, from the house, or not buying them in the first place. This means temptations are removed, which can be especially helpful for those who may be more susceptible to their food [environment](#).

Planning [social events](#) around non-food activities can help reduce social influences on eating. For example, why not catch up with friends for a walk instead of lunch at a fast-food restaurant.

Creating certain rules and habits can reduce cues for eating. For example, not eating at your desk, in the car, or in front of the TV will,

over time, lessen the effects of these situations as cues for eating.

You could also try keeping a food diary to identify what moods and emotions trigger eating. Once you've identified these triggers, develop a plan to help break these habits. Strategies may include doing another activity you enjoy such as going for a short walk or listening to music—anything that can help manage the mood or emotion where you would have typically reached for the fridge.

Write (and stick to) a grocery list and avoid shopping for food when hungry. Plan and prepare meals and snacks ahead of time so eating decisions are made in advance of situations where you might feel especially hungry or tired or be influenced by your food environment.

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