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Over-egging the chocolate this Easter: why you should always keep an eye on what you are eating

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Psychologists at the University of Birmingham suggest that 'attentive eating' affects how much people choose to eat.

A paper published recently by the Birmingham team in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* took an overview of research on attentive eating and concluded that encouraging people to eat more attentively could aid appetite control.

As Easter is around the corner, many people will be buying and eating chocolate. For most, eating chocolate will be an enjoyable indulgence but for others, the presence of chocolate in the house will be an unwelcome temptation and consumption may be associated with feelings of guilt about diet breaking.

Dr Suzanne Higgs, Reader in the Psychobiology of Appetite in the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham, said: "People make many decisions every day about what foods to eat and how much to eat. These decisions are made easily and seemingly without much thought. Yet underlying these choices are sophisticated psychological processes that can be easily disrupted, especially if we are distracted by other demands. So it is perhaps no surprise that we sometimes eat more than intended."

"We reviewed the results of 24 tightly controlled studies in which people were either attentive to the food they ate or were distracted. When people were distracted away from their meals by watching TV or playing computer games they tended to eat more at that meal than people who were not distracted. But there was a double whammy because distraction at a meal also resulted in more calories being consumed at later snacking sessions. My advice would be to make time for eating and avoid eating on the go this Easter - this might make meals that bit more enjoyable and could help avoid overindulgence."

The evidence suggests that distracted eating reduces people's ability to remember what they have eaten earlier in the day. Since food memories normally inhibit later appetite, distraction may increase intake later in the day by interfering with these memories. On the other hand, eating attentively by thinking about the flavour and texture of food while eating reduces later snacking and recalling the most recent meal eaten decreased snack intake by about 10%.

Strategies that encourage "attentive eating" such as avoiding eating while doing other things and taking time to think about what was eaten at the last meal could be a more effective alternative to effortful calorie counting for people who want to avoid overconsumption.

The researchers are currently developing a mobile phone app that allows people to easily review what they have eaten by taking photos of their meals. The app also provides prompts to help people eat more attentively. Early feasibility testing suggests that people find the app easy to use and that it fits it into their eating routines.

A full weight control trial with colleagues at Liverpool and Oxford Universities will follow.

Notes to Editors

Paper: ***Eating attentively: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of food intake memory and awareness on eating (http://ajcn.nutrition.org./content/97/4/728.abstract)***, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition

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