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

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Many people will be buying chocolate Easter eggs this week. 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. Sticking to a diet can be difficult especially in the face of an abundance of moreish foods like chocolate. Monitoring food intake takes a lot of effort and being vigilant about one's diet can be easily derailed. We 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.

Research into the psychology of appetite suggests that paying attention to food while we eat and taking time to remember what we have eaten earlier in the day affects how much we choose to eat. We call this 'attentive eating'. **A paper we published recently (http://ajcn.nutrition.org./content/97/4/728.abstract)** 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. 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. The evidence suggests that distracted eating reduces our ability to remember what we have eaten earlier in the day. Because 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. One approach we are developing is 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. We are now taking this forward in a full weight control trial with colleagues at Liverpool and Oxford Universities. Making time for eating and avoiding eating on the go this Easter might make meals that bit more enjoyable and could help avoid overindulgence.

**Dr Suzanne Higgs**

Reader in the Psychobiology of Appetite, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham