



FIONA HOBAN

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Food, glorious food

I love this quote by Samuel Johnson: "A cucumber should be well sliced, and dressed with pepper and vinegar, and then thrown out as good for nothing." Gradual and sustainable weight loss is what it's all about as far as I'm concerned, and it certainly puts to rest all the faddish dieting tips we've heard over the years!

Two weeks ago I looked at the "mindless margin", ie, how most of us can increase our overall food intake by about 20% and be none the wiser. Unfortunately, it adds up, with the result being a gradual increase in our weight over the years. Of course, this also works in reverse; if we decrease our overall food intake even by a mere 10%, this results in a gradual weight loss. Why do we eat too much? There are many reasons and I'll address a couple of the less obvious ones now. Research is now showing that people who watch a lot of TV are more likely to be overweight than people who don't. It doesn't matter what they're watching. As TV viewing goes up, weight goes up. The more TV you watch, the more inclined you are to eat and the less inclined you are to pay attention to how much you eat, or for how long.

A recent study in Ireland showed that 41% of families who breakfasted together said the television was turned on as they ate their meal. 38% of families who ate dinner together had the TV on during the meal. Nearly half of all nine-year-olds have a TV in their bedrooms. These statistics must have a direct correlation to the rise in obesity in Ireland both among adults and children.



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SIZE MATTERS

Another reason is due to the increase in serving norms. A serving norm is the size of something that we deem to be appropriate or normal to eat or to use. Serving-size norms were different 50 years ago. They have increased in size, and, what do you know, so too have we.

Studies show that people who were given a large packet of pasta, sauce and meat typically prepared 23% more than those given medium packages. Did they eat this extra size portion? Yes.

It seems that we all consume more from bigger packages, whatever the product. Why? Because big packets suggest a bigger serving norm. People eat 20-25% more on average from the larger packages. For snack foods, it's even worse. Those who were given a half-pound bag of M&Ms ate 71 sweets; those who were given the one-pound bag ate an average of 137 – almost twice as many.

I think it's curious that we eat about 20-25% more just because the packet is larger. It really shows the mindless margin at work – our ability to eat a bit more without realising it.

A little bit of awareness and common sense can go a long way. So here's a couple of tips that don't cost you a penny: when you're eating your meals, avoid all distractions – particularly the TV.

And if you're buying larger packets of food, maybe make sure to empty the contents into regular size containers. Alternatively, use a scoop. That way two scoops stays as two scoops no matter how big the packet (or cucumber!). **CL**

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