

FOOD TO DELIGHT

Why diets make you feel miserable (but some foods cheer you up)

You love chocolate but feel guilty if you eat it. You don't really like salads but feel pleased when you have one. You're unhappy when you starve yourself to lose weight but full of glee when you can get into those size 12 jeans.

Why does what we eat have such a huge effect on our happiness?

Experts say it's all down to the way that chemicals in food affect the brain.

'The simplest way to change how you feel is to change your diet,' says nutritional biochemist Jeannette Jackson. 'For example, turkey contains a substance called tryptophan, which makes you feel relaxed and peaceful.'

'If you eat steak with salad, that produces the brain chemical dopamine, which makes you feel mentally alert.'

A survey carried out by the Food and Mood Project found that nearly 90 per cent of people who took part in the study felt that a better diet had improved their mental health. And a quarter reported that their mental health conditions, including mood swings, panic attacks and anxiety, had got better following a change of diet.

'There is plenty of evidence to support both the positive and negative effects of food on the way we feel,'

says Kate Neil, director of the Centre for Nutrition Education and Life Management. 'What you eat goes into your gastro-intestinal tract, or gut. As the gut digests food, it sends vitamins, minerals and energy into your bloodstream, which nourishes your body and your brain.'

So why do some 'comfort' foods like milk chocolate make us happy, even though they contain ingredients such as fat and sugar that can be bad for us?

'A lot of food makes us feel good because the food industry has created it to do so,' explains Kate Neil. 'Food manufacturers have discovered that foods high in fat and sugar feel pleasant in our mouths and send that feel-good factor to our brains.'

Unfortunately, chances are that your sugar high won't leave you contented for long.

'Bad food not only makes you feel bad, it creates cravings,' says Jeannette Jackson. 'You've not eaten lunch, your blood sugar levels have dropped and you're in a rotten mood — so you self-medicate with food. You're tired and want energy, so you reach for a chocolate bar or a bun. It gives you a rush of brain chemicals such as dopamine, which make you feel good. But as the sugar rush leaves



Battling weight can be depressing



Jeannette Jackson

HAPPY eats

- Avocados, mangoes and bananas contain vitamin B6, which can help ward off depression
- Oily fish such as tuna and salmon contain omega oils, which help the brain to function
- Hazelnuts and walnuts also contain omega oils
- Chicken and turkey contain tryptophan, a chemical that helps you feel relaxed
- Pineapple contains bromelain, an enzyme that helps digestion and encourages good gut health



SAD snacks

- Too much caffeine from coffee or fizzy drinks can make you stressed and affect your sleep
- Alcohol may make you feel good for a few hours but it's a depressant
- Sugary snacks like chocolate will give you a high but it won't last for long
- Too much saturated and hydrogenated fat could affect your memory and brain health

your system, you come crashing down. You feel apathetic, guilty and depressed, so you reach for another chocolate bar. It's a vicious circle.'

Kate Neil adds: 'If your gut isn't working properly, it could end up sending particles from food into your bloodstream, which could be toxic to your brain, causing disorders such as depression.'

But putting yourself on a strict diet isn't the answer. A recent survey from Marks & Spencer found that one in five of us lasts just a month on a diet. And recent research from the US found that Americans are also fed up with crazy food plans. Two-thirds of those surveyed said they were less likely to try a specialised or fad diet today compared with five years ago.

Why is this? Could it be that we're fed up being miserable?

'Faddy diets throw out your body's natural balance,' says health and wellbeing consultant Liz Tucker. 'If you're eating nothing but cabbage soup or pineapples, your body will be overdosing on some nutrients and not getting enough of others.'

'The nutrients in food work together. You need vitamins and minerals to turn carbohydrates into energy. If your body isn't getting what it needs, you feel tired and depressed.'

Jeannette Jackson agrees that extreme diets aren't the way forward.

'All fad diets feed into our fears,' she says. 'We're terrified of not fitting into that wedding dress or holiday bikini. We convince ourselves that we have to lose weight rapidly. I think fad diets are a form of self-abuse.'

So what's the answer?

Kate Neil says that the quality of



Kate Neil

SAY CHEESE!

● We've known for centuries that some foods can have an aphrodisiac effect — oysters, chocolate and strawberries are all supposed to get you in the mood. But modern science says that it's best to go for cheese.

Cheese contains more phenylethylamine, the 'love drug' brain chemical that gives you that chocolate high. So order a cheese platter after dinner and see if it gets you both in the mood.

Clare Spurrell, relationships expert, www.ivilage.com



● A study from the Institute of Psychiatry in London found that ice cream makes you happy — even in winter. Scientists asked volunteers to have their brains scanned while eating vanilla ice cream. The images showed the areas of the brain associated with pleasure lighting up as the volunteers ate.

food has a lot to do with how we feel. 'The soil that our cereals, fruit and vegetables grow in doesn't contain as many vital minerals as it used to,' she says. 'We need them for good brain and body health but now the vitamin and mineral content of our food is lower.'

According to Jeannette Jackson, if you want to change your diet you need

to alter your habits. 'Look at the big picture,' she says. 'Where is your life going? Where do you want it to go? Why do you eat the way you do? The only way you can change the way you are is to change your diet permanently and for the better.'

And Liz Tucker believes that a good diet is a simple one. 'Go back to basic foods — fruit, veg, nuts, seeds, meat and fish,' she says. 'Unprocessed food contains all the ingredients you need to make you happy!'

Lucy Jolin

● Visit Liz Tucker's website at www.behappybehealthy.co.uk. Contact Jeannette Jackson on www.jeannettejackson.com. Find out more about the Centre for Nutrition Education and Life Management on www.cnelm.co.uk