Photo: http://www.familyfriendlyfrugality.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Decison-Making-Food.jpg

Eating Habits:

The *what*, *when*, and *why* behind food choices

Have you ever found yourself eating even when you're not hungry? What makes you want to reach for that sweet dessert instead of a vegetable salad? Why do you like some foods and not others, and why are your preferences different from those of other people? These are the type of questions that researchers have been investigating for over 100 years. It turns out that the reasons behind our food choices, which include our feelings of hunger and thirst as well as the variety of foods that we choose to consume, are a product of both our physiology and our environment.

Hunger, Satiety, and Thirst

Hunger is often experienced by a "rumbling" of the tummy which is cause by stomach contractions. However, there is a lot more at play than just those muscle movements. Physiologically speaking, if you haven't eaten in a while and your blood sugar is in decline, your body is going to release hormones to tell your brain that you are truly hungry, and your body needs to consume food for energy. Fullness, or satiety, is often experienced by feelings of a full stomach and the decreased desire to consume more food. There are specific parts of the brain and nervous system that assist in determining when we start and stop eating, and chemicals in our intestines to let us know when we are full.

Just like hunger is often associated with a rumbling tummy, feelings of thirst are often prompted by a dry mouth. But that isn't the only thing that happens when the body is in need of hydration. Within our bodies, there are carefully regulated mechanisms that influence our sensations of thirst in order to keep our us balanced and hydrated. Like hunger, certain parts of the brain are involved in letting us know when we are thirsty and when we are not. Other organs are involved in thirst and fluid balance, such as the kidneys and even the lungs.

From an evolutionary standpoint, our bodies are wired to know when we should eat and drink, how much food and water we need to consume, and when we have had enough. To explain why humans sometimes eat, even when the body is not in need of energy, researchers examined several environmental factors. What they have discovered is that external signals, such as the sight, smell, sound, or even just the thought of food, can lead to physiological feelings of hunger. Consequently, humans who live in cultures with an abundance of food and are constantly surrounded by food related signals continue to eat, even in the absence of a true need for food.

Photo: http://clipart-library.com/food-cartoon.html

Food Preferences

Photo: http://losingweightdone.com/the-feeling-when-you-must-eat-something-sweet/

There are a lot of factors involved in determining our food preferences. Some are genetic, such as a general preference for sweet and salty foods. In nature, foods that are sweet are often a source of carbohydrates, which means easy fuel for the body. When humans were still an evolving species, living off the land, carbohydrates were a simple form of quick energy. Thus, our bodies developed a "sweet tooth". Likewise, foods with a salty taste often indicate the presence of minerals that are crucial for our health. Therefore, developing a taste for sweet and salty foods was essential for our survival. Also determined by our genetics are other taste preferences, such as the taste for bitter foods. Some people, called "super tasters" express a certain genetic trait which allows then to detect bitter notes in food much more strongly than others can. These people are less likely to enjoy bitter foods such as broccoli or grapefruit.

Some other factors that influence our preferences for certain foods come from our environment. For example, we all know that the smell and visual appearance of foods can be appealing or not. If a food smells good, and looks good, you may decide that you want to eat it. If it smells rotten, you likely won't want it. Aside from the obvious, we are also driven to consume foods based on their frequency in our diet. If, for example, you eat the same food every day, eventually you will get tired of it, your preference for it will go down and your desire for other foods will increase. If you try a new, exotic food for the first time and you enjoy it, but that food is inaccessible to you, you may find that you have cravings for it until you have the chance to eat it again. Neophilia, or the desire to try new things, differs from person to person, and is to a certain extent a product of genetics. Some people are more adventurous with trying new foods than others are, and in general we are more likely to choose foods that we are familiar with.

Photo: http://www.eatthis.com/pizza-facts/

Experience plays an important role in our food preferences. If you've ever had food poisoning, you know what I'm talking about. For example, if you go out for pizza one night, and later on you get sick from it, the next time you think about eating pizza, you may not want it. In fact, you may never want to eat pizza again, depending on how sick it made you. This is called taste aversion. Even associating foods with certain feelings or experiences and can determine our preference for that food. If you went out for pizza and your partner decided to break off your relationship, leading to feelings of sadness, your desire for pizza might disappear even if there was no physical illness involved. If, on the other hand, eating pizza is always associated with positive experiences, like going out with friends to grab a slice after work, it may be one of your favorite foods.

There are many other factors that help to determine our consumption of food and drink. Aspects like social norms, culture, moods and feelings, and food accessibility all weigh in on the decisions, and vary from person to person. The things that drive us to eat and drink, whether physiological or environmental, are a complex combination of our evolution, our genetics, and our experiences.

Sources:

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