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## Why one cake is never enough: Addictive additives in food MAKE us eat more

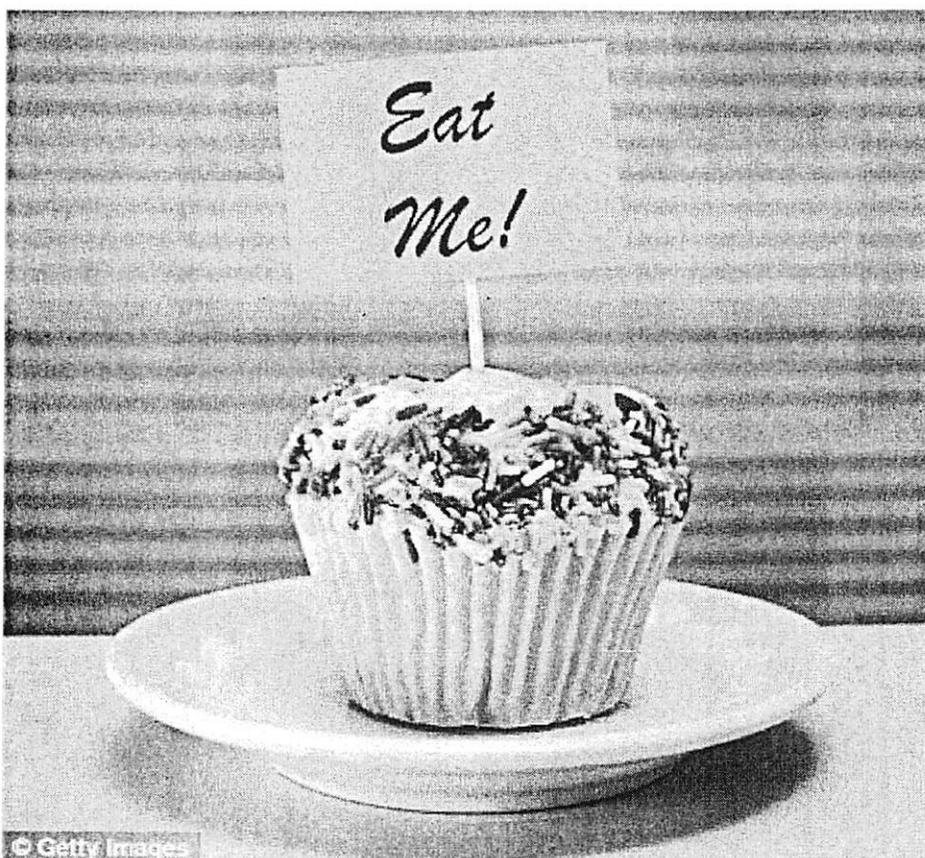
By [Sarah Hughes](#)

Last updated at 9:54 AM on 03rd August 2009

Picture the scene: it's late, you're tired and stretched out in front of the TV, barely concentrating on what's going on in front of you.

Almost without warning, your hand stretches out to the plate of chocolate biscuits on the table and, before you know it and without really meaning to, you've eaten the lot.

Unless you have the willpower of Madonna (in which case, congratulations, but watch those arms!), we've all been there, mindlessly shoving food in our mouths - be it sweet or savoury, for no real reason beyond the fact that it's in front of us.



**It's NOT our fault: It's the combination of fats, sugars and salts used by food manufacturers to trigger a 'bliss' point in the brain, a study shows**

Small wonder that a 2008 report in the *Journal Of Epidemiology And Community Health* found British obesity levels have quadrupled over the past 25 years. Almost one-third of all adults (approximately 13 million of us) will be obese by 2012.

Despite all the talk about sustainable produce and countless articles about going back to nature and growing our own fruit and veg, how many of us follow through these healthy dreams?

We might make the odd effort to eat more carefully, to watch our portions and exercise more, but, ultimately, many of us resort to bingeing on the wrong foods.

But guess what? It might not all be down to our appalling lack of willpower. According to David Kessler, the former commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, over-eating might be due to something altogether more insidious - the combination of fats, sugars and salt used by food manufacturers to trigger a 'bliss' point in the human brain.

Kessler admits to having been a binge eater and swing dieter, and someone who has 'owned suits in every size'.

In his bestseller *The End Of Over-Eating: Taking Control Of The Insatiable American Appetite*, he claims that until society addresses the wider issues surrounding food, we are condemned to continue the binge-and-purge cycle that dominates so many lives.

He argues that we must transform the way we view food. For whether it's celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow who recently blogged about undergoing a strict detox after 'a majorly fun and delicious relax-and-enjoy-life phase', or ordinary people (a recent survey reported that a quarter of the British population is on a diet), we live in a world where food is no longer just a fuel for survival or something to enjoy, but an all-consuming obsession.

'It's time to stop blaming individuals for being overweight or obese,' says Kessler.

'The real problem is we've created a world where food is always available and that it is designed to make you want more of it. For millions of us, modern food is impossible to resist.'

Reading the above, there will, no doubt, be people shaking their heads and muttering: 'Just what we need - another load of trendy excuses for people who are just weak-willed and greedy.'

But to dismiss Kessler - who is professor of paediatrics, epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California - as an apologist for fatties is to do him a grave disservice.

For *The End Of Over-Eating* has been praised by figures as diverse as chef Anthony Bourdain, *Fast Food Nation* author Eric Schlosser and former U.S. surgeon general David Satcher. It is a serious, scientific look at the way in which food is manufactured and marketed.

Kessler says it all comes down to the bliss point. 'The right combination of tastes triggers a greater number of neurons, getting them to fire more,' he explains.

'The message to eat becomes stronger, motivating the eater to look for even more food.

'Many of us have a bliss point - the point at which we get the greatest pleasure from sugar, fat or salt. As more is added, food becomes more pleasurable, till we reach that point, after which it becomes too sweet and the pleasure drops off.'

In other words, your occasional, inexplicable craving for that extra slice of chocolate cake or a midnight scoop of ice cream is not so inexplicable after all.

Certain foods trigger the bliss point more than others, among them Heinz tomato ketchup, Starbuck's frappuccinos, Pringles crisps and pretty much anything from that old fast-food devil McDonald's.

As Kessler explains, the U.S. fast-food industry of today runs entirely on the ruthless pursuit of profit.

Thus, where 30 years ago a triple chocolate muffin was made with real eggs, real chocolate and real butter, today it will be considerably bigger, leading the customer to believe they are getting more value for money.

Yet, instead of butter, it will contain fat substitutes, powdered egg instead of whole eggs and inexpensive processed sweeteners, according to Kessler.

It's food as an illusion; a combination of chemicals designed to trigger the brain's neurons and make customers crave more.

But while this sugar obsession is not shocking to anyone who's been to the U.S. (a GP in New York once told me he advised all European and British clients not to eat U.S. bread or pasta because its high levels of refined sugar led to rapid weight gain), it's all too easy to talk of this simply as an American problem.

But as Kessler explains: 'Few of us are immune to the dangers of over-eating. The ubiquitous presence of food, large portion sizes, incessant marketing and the cultural assumption that it's acceptable to eat anywhere, at any time, have combined to put more people at risk.'

Here in Britain we're just as guilty of turning to fast food for a quickfix solution. Who among us can honestly say we never slip a ready meal into the shopping trolley or order a takeaway? And, the wealthy apart, can anyone afford to spend their days hunting down the right organic food, ensuring it's free from pesticides and pests?

For this is one of the fundamental issues with obesity: the poorer you are, the less healthy your food is likely to be.

As Kessler, while describing how American fast food 'ate the world', notes: 'I witnessed the unfortunate effect of this firsthand when I visited clinics in South Africa providing HIV-related care.

'In desperately poor townships, I kept meeting obese healthcare workers. I asked a medical colleague to explain the paradox. "Simple," she said. "Kentucky Fried Chicken has come to town."'

Here, as in the U.S., the best deals in supermarkets are often for the unhealthiest products.

We are seduced by the packaging telling us we're getting an extra 15 per cent for free, yet Kessler tells us most of the time that 15 per cent is something synthetic, designed to ensure more profit heading the food company's way.

What can be done? We've been inundated with campaigns, from the Government's healthy eating plans to Jamie Oliver's school dinners. But does anything work?

Rather than simply alerting people to the methods manufacturers use to keep their foods popular, Kessler suggests ways we can combat obesity.

'The goal is not to vilify all food and those who serve it, but to change thinking about big food - huge portions of layered, loaded food with little nutritional value.

'You have to understand your own behaviour around food and pay attention to everything you eat. You need to bear in mind how the brain processes stimuli and how that drives your behaviour. And you need to always remember what the food industry is trying to sell you and why.' With that understanding, Kessler argues, will come a new way of eating.

'Understanding what triggers over-eating and planning accordingly gives you a much greater chance of taking control. You'll still have to fight the conditioned responses that drive over-eating, but while the neural pathways that created the cue-urgetreward-habit cycle can't easily be wiped out, they can be managed.'

In other words, Kessler believes we should regard our food habits in the same way in which former smokers look at their former 40-a-day habit.

Just as a smoker has to condition themselves to stop thinking of 'a quick cigarette' as a reward for a job well done or having the odd drag in times of stress, so those who over-eat need to stop thinking of cupcakes and crisps as rewards or turning to food for comfort in a crisis.

The act of eating should not be an act of denial, but one of enjoyment - it's just a matter of everything in moderation rather than the all-or-nothing attitude so common in today's world.

But the primary lesson from Kessler's book is that instead of simply blaming and shaming those who weigh more, we should reconsider our entire relationship with food and look at why some people are more likely to respond to the stimuli provided by salt, sugar and fat than others.

Until we stop celebrating this purge-andbinge culture, and pitting the super-skinny against the very fat, little will change.

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I blame those who with their very bad eating habits, have allowed mega food companies to feed all the rest of us with non substance foods.

I pay money towards food therefore Im very cautious with who I support with my money and eat as less artificial as possible. I have done my research and I take full responsibility!

- sophie, notts, 03/8/2009 13:52

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I agree with the rules of no treats in the cupboard. at home we rarely have sweets and biscuits in the cupboard. ITs treat so we have it as a treat and buy it there and then.

Blaming money as an issue for stopping people from eating healthy food is absolute rubbish. I am a single working mum, and my budget is always tight.

However I have not gone for the easy options to buy ready meal or junk food. You can eat very healthy food no problem. There is no excuse. Just pure laziness. If anybody is stuck Let me know and I will draw you a menu no problem

- Frenchy, City, 03/8/2009 13:17

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Once you have eaten something with sweeteners (artificial ones as well as sugar) anything afterwards tastes bland.

Even so called healthy breakfast cereals are laced with sweetener prompting us to snack on sweet things the rest of the day.

A normal meal at lunch time thus seems tasteless, leading children especially to associate fruit and vegetables with tastelessness. Jamie Oliver's campaign is a lost cause if kids were sent off to school on sugary breakfasts.

No wonder us older ones think today's food doesn't taste as nice as food from the 50s and 60s - it's because everything is so laced with sugar that natural foods taste like cardboard by comparison.

- Roy, Southend, UK, 03/8/2009 13:03

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I am no Madonna and I am certainly glad that I don't have her arms but I have always eaten normally and never had a problem with weight. If ever I crave anything, which is rare, I eat it and it is gone. I have never denied myself anything but the secret is probably in the fact that I eat very tasty meals so I don't go around craving all kinds of stuff. I love cooking and meal times at my home are mostly a treat in themselves. We don't deny ourselves a tasty dish with a sauce, are not obsessed with health or weight and that probably keeps us sane and eating meals which are quite fulfilling. Maybe food for thought?

- Francisca, France, 03/8/2009 11:56

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R, Australia:

I agree AND disagree with you

Food additives are a cause of obesity. A small one, but still. Since people eat more additives in their food, they get less nutrients. The less essential nutrients you get, the more your metabolism slows down. After a LONG period of time, you gain some weight eating the same amount of food. It's only a small contributor, but it is still a contribution. Obviously the main cause is eating too much, and not exercising. I do agree with you there, and I agree with you that we always want to blame something else for society being so fat- skinny models, we're 1/2 an inch taller than last century, not enough money to spend on healthy food etc

But if you can spend money on 3 TVs and 1000s of pounds on clothes and beauty products, I'm sure you can afford healthy food.

- kate, somewhere, 03/8/2009 11:52

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I read Dr. Kessler's book - fascinating and makes total sense. We have to change the way we perceive these over the top foods the food industry is whipping up for us at restaurants and in stores and see them for what they really are--not a "guilty pleasure" but as fat on top of sugar on top of fat....I think it's all about moderation and not keeping it in the house in my case. Out of sight, out of mind.

- Isabella, CA, USA, 03/8/2009 11:45

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