

### **JUNK FOOD TASTES GOOD TO TRICK US INTO EATING LOTS OF IT.**

Eat, drink and be merry! Food can make an occasion special. Most of us can imagine the Christmas ham, with all the trimmings; even sometimes how it smells as it bakes away in the oven. Perhaps Nana makes an exceptional pudding that we wait for all year long. And most adults will know that children aren't the only ones who have visions of sugarplums. But we may have other visions as well: our expanding waistline, those words from the doctor, that New Year's resolution to be healthier. Many of us treat the holiday season as a sort of drawn out last request – the final time to enjoy without guilt all that luscious fatty, salty, sugary food. So, why does bad food taste so good?



In order to understand this fully, let's take a step back into the past; to a time when food was not plentiful, and our meals came irregularly. This is when our most engrained eating habits arose. With food uncertain it was important to eat as much food as possible when we got the chance, since one never knew when the chance would come again. Our brains told us to gorge ourselves on that fresh boar and ripe juicy fruit whenever it came along, since we might only get twigs and berries for the next few weeks. This strategy worked brilliantly: it made sure we could get enough energy and nutrients to fuel our bodies just in case the next food didn't come right away. In today's world, where food is all around, this strategy works against us – our brains tell us to eat while we have the chance, and, it can be very difficult to resist; especially around the holidays.

But there's a further twist on this. New scientific research from Gravidia, one of New Zealand's Centres of Research Excellence, provides clues about why we can't stop eating junk food. Apparently we humans choose foods that meet our protein needs: 50-60g/day for adults under 70 (a 140g fillet steak has about 40g protein and 1400kJ). If our meals have enough protein, then our bodies have what they need to stay healthy, and we lose the desire to keep eating. If we eat junk food, even though it's high energy, our bodies don't get the protein they need, so we keep eating. Consider this: A 40g serve of crispy chips has 2g protein, so in order to get that 40g of protein that's in our steak we would need to eat 800g – that's 18,000 kJ! If we need to eat that much to satisfy our needs, then it better taste really good; and junk food certainly does.

Eat sensibly, eat well, and above all – enjoy the holidays!

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**Reference:** Martinez-Cordero et al (2012) "Testing the Protein Leverage Hypothesis in a free-living human population." *Appetite* 59:312-315.