

What we are, what we eat

Neurotic men may prefer quiche or a fatty lamb chop. Tough-minded women probably avoid salt but succumb to chocolate. And if you have a fatalistic streak, then it's a fair bet you're more inclined to white bread and soft drinks, and unlikely to stick to a diet.

What you eat, it appears, can reveal more about your personality than Rorschach's famous inkblots. If you can't lose weight, the answer may not be to try another dreary diet, but to see a behavioural psychologist.

According to the preliminary findings of an intriguing experiment under way in Adelaide, personality seems to play a significant role in the selection of the types of food we consume.

Surprisingly little work has been done on investigating the psychological basis for why people eat what they eat. In an effort to find out why some people can change to a healthier diet, while others blanch at the sight of a raw carrot, CSIRO and University of Adelaide researchers have conducted a large survey of how Australians feel about themselves and food.

They sent a detailed questionnaire to 1500 randomly selected men and women in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane. Apart from asking what they eat, the questionnaire probes respondents on 'everyday situations' to assess their general attitudes and reactions. For example, it asks: 'Do you believe that wishing can make good things happen?' The questions seek the respondents' feelings about luck, their parents, school memories, how they cope with daily problems and challenges and what they think of people who don't like them.

The questionnaire includes a list of questions about the link between health and food, and an Eysenck personality test — a standardised psychological tool for measuring emotional level, whether the person is introvert or extrovert, and whether the person has a 'tough-minded attitude' or not.

Dr Katrine Baghurst, a nutritionist at CSIRO's Division of Human Nutrition, and Ms Helen Falconer, a Masters degree student at the University's Department of Psychology, compiled and analysed the results. What they found was unexpected: some personality types are more closely associated with certain eating habits than are many of the traditional indicators such as age and occupation.

In particular, the researchers found that a psychological factor known as 'locus of control' can be strongly correlated with diet. This is a measure of how

much a person believes he or she controls his or her well-being. People with a high locus of control believe their decisions play a big part in what happens to them in life, while those with a low one believe external factors (some call it fate) dominate their personal circumstances. Among the survey's respondents, high locus of control was strongly associated with high fibre intake in men and women, low cholesterol intake in men and low sugar intake in women. The link appears to be stronger in women than in men.

Other personality factors were found to correlate with eating patterns, although less strongly. For example, women with a tough-minded, aggressive or solitary attitude were found to consume more refined sugar but less salt and protein than others, while men who scored highly on the neuroticism scale were less inclined to eat fibre, but tended towards cholesterol-rich foods, perhaps due to a failure to control cravings and urges. Extrovert women seemed to prefer salty foods, while tough-minded men were more likely to eschew fruit and vegetables.

Dr Baghurst says people with a high locus of control are not necessarily healthy eaters — anorexics, for example, provide an extreme case where poor eating habits can be associated with high locus of control. But people with high locus of control are more likely than others to choose a healthy diet to improve their physical well-being.

'Changing your diet is quite a complicated and difficult action, compared with, say, giving up smoking', she said. 'You don't see any immediate benefit, you eat throughout the day, often in a family setting, and the buying of healthy food may be a problem. Under these conditions then, personality factors are going to dominate, and the person has to have a belief that changing diet will help.'

People with a low locus of control, she says, often display a lack of self-esteem and morale, or a perceived susceptibility to ill-health. In order to change to a healthier diet, they may need counselling to convince them that change is possible and would be beneficial, as well as information about good nutrition.

The researchers are extending their study of personality and hope to develop a behavioural model that will enable more effective treatment of people with food-related health problems such as diabetes and heart disease.

The research may also be useful in the design of health-promotion campaigns.

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