

Is Your Environment Making You Fat?

By Jackie Storm PhD CNS

The world is filled with cues to start eating, from the peanuts on the coffee table to the candy bars at the corner newsstand. Everywhere you turn there's something else to eat. The bakery you walk by every morning on the way to work. The popcorn at the movie theater. The sidewalk vendor selling dried fruit and nuts. The hotdog stand. The pretzel stand. The ice cream stand. Food, food, and more food.

We see something, buy it on impulse, and then berate ourselves for lack of willpower. Often we invent explanations to fit our behavior: *I'm orally fixated*, or *I'm a compulsive eater*. In fact, there is no such thing as will power. But there is such a thing as self-control. And self-control is a choice. When you say: *I couldn't help myself. I was totally out of control*, the truth is you had total control of what you were doing. You just don't approve of the choice that you made.

In fairness, however, making right choices becomes a lot easier when we spend a little time cleaning up the environment. The urge to eat is a perfectly normal part of our biological makeup. We are programmed to maintain the status quo, and while it is possible to override your biological programming by choosing not to eat, that choice is a lot easier when you are not sitting in front of a table covered with desserts.

The simple fact is, you cannot eat the ice cream that isn't in the freezer. You can't eat what you don't have, and you won't want what you can't see. When you keep cakes in the house "*in case company comes*," or you buy cookies "*for the kids*," you are setting yourself up for failure. When we start playing tug of war between our urge to eat and our desire to be thinner, inevitably we lose.

Understand clearly, the problem isn't ice cream (or cake, or cookies, or whatever.) If you get a craving for a slice of cheesecake, take yourself out to a restaurant, order a slice of cheesecake, make mad passionate love to it, and then get up and leave the restaurant. You are in control! Don't buy a cheesecake, put it in the refrigerator and try not to eat it. The cheesecake is in control. You'll lose.

We live in a world that wants to keep us fat. And I am convinced that the food industry and the health care industry are in cahoots with each other. The more money we spend

on food, the better for the food industry. The more we eat, the more apt we are to require medications to lower our blood pressure, our blood sugar, and our cholesterol, and the better that is for the drug industry. In fact our chronic diseases keep the health care industry in business. There is money to be made in open-heart surgery, gastric bypass surgery, and hip and knee replacements.

Did you know...? Every year in the US some 500,000 individuals have cardiac bypass surgery to replace their clogged arteries. Average cost? \$80,000.

What I am advocating is change. And that starts with you taking the control of your life (and your weight) away from the environment and giving it back to yourself. Let me show you some of the ways your environment may be making you fat.

Thirty years ago if you stopped at the corner deli to pick up a turkey sandwich for lunch, it came on regular bread, and contained about three ounces of filling.

Let's tally up those numbers:

2 slices of bread = 150 calories

3 oz of turkey = 150 calories (at 50 calories per ounce)

lettuce and tomato = 25 calories

a schmear of mayo (1 T.) = 100 calories

Total = 425 calories

Fast forward to today:

Sandwiches today come on bagels, wraps, heros (a.k.a. subs) and Paninis.

A typical bagel weighs in at about 5 ounces. That's equal to about 6 slices of bread. Paninis are 3-4 ounces or more. Add in the filling, the globs of mayonnaise, and the cheese, and you have a lunchtime sandwich that may tip the scale at 1500 calories or better. (For many of us, that's what we need for the entire day.)

To make matters worse, many delis throw in a bag of *free* potato chips. We eat the chips, not because we are hungry, not because we need the extra calories or the rancid fat, we eat them because they are there. And in the process we condition ourselves to think of chips as a normal part of lunch. When they aren't there, we think we've been gyped.

Now, you know those chips aren't really free, right? What they are is a marketing ploy to keep us coming back to the same deli or restaurant. And it's a good ploy since most of us value getting our monies worth. Heck, isn't that what keeps people supersizing their fries at fast food restaurants? An order of fries used to be 2 & 1/2 ounces. Now, the supersize version is nearly 7 ounces.

In coffee shops all over the US sandwiches are routinely served with French fries. (And this is frequently not listed on the menu.) And not 5 or 6 French fries mind you, more like a quart. Yes, I said a quart.

Everywhere you turn portions have gotten bigger, and they are continuing to grow. Even the dinner plates have grown from 8 inches to 12 inches in diameter. So what is a health-conscious or weight-conscious consumer supposed to do?

Actions to take to control portions:

- ❑ Don't finish what is on your plate. Either take it home for another day, or just leave the food behind.

Example: I ordered grilled salmon in a coffee shop one day. The portion I was served was a pound. You heard me correctly. I said 16 ounces of salmon. Now, I love salmon, but that was overkill. The quantity of mashed potatoes that came with it exceeded three cups. Had I cleaned my plate—as most of us have been taught to do—my calorie intake at that meal would have exceeded 1400 calories. I took 2/3 of the order home, and finished it over several days.

- ❑ Split the order with someone else.
- ❑ Ask questions. Don't assume anything about the order—such as whether or not the omelet comes with home fries—ask.
- ❑ Make special requests. Ask the waiter not to bring the bread. Ask for a smaller portion. Ask for dressings and sauces on the side.
- ❑ Order sandwiches on regular bread, not on a hero, bagel or large wrap. If you must have the larger breads then limit your portion to half. Either split the sandwich with someone else or throw half of it away.

One of my clients routinely throws out half her sandwich before she even starts to eat. Does the idea of wasting food bother you? I understand. But does it make any sense to treat your body like a garbage can? Does it make sense to allow your environment to decide for you how much you are going to eat, and therefore, how much you are going to weigh?

As long as your environment continues to expose you to excessive quantities of food, we have no choice but to throw away the excesses. Recently, I had an argument with someone in the restaurant industry who claims to abhor wasting food, and he argued that the only reason restaurants serve larger and larger portions is that consumers keep asking for larger and larger amounts. I disagree. I don't want larger portions, nor do most of my clients. Nor do most people I talk to.

More actions to take:

- ❑ We need to start saying: “That's too much for me. Give me less.”
- ❑ We need to start recognizing our role and our power as agents of social change. If you and I start to make our wishes known, and then our friends start to make their wishes known, and then our co-workers.... Well, you get the picture.

Is your job making you fat?

Do you regularly attend business meetings in the morning? Is food made available at these meetings? Let me guess. Bagels, donuts, croissants, and coffee, right? And, I'll bet there's not a gram of protein anywhere in sight. These high carbohydrate foods will do little for your waistline, and even less for your productivity. Let's take a look at what happens.

Carbs, Insulin, Appetite and Weight gain

If you start your day with bread and cake products—which digest down into sugar—the body will produce insulin to move that sugar out of your blood and into your cells. Shortly after consumption of bread and cake products, blood sugar drops to where it was before you ate, and you are hungry again. Furthermore, if you don't need the carbohydrate at the time it is consumed, it will be converted into fat and stored as such.

Individuals who need to lose weight will do better having a high protein breakfast than having a high carbohydrate breakfast. At the very least, if one is going to have starchy foods, one should also have protein at the same time. A mixed meal will take longer to digest, and slow down stomach emptying time. The presence of protein will help to keep blood sugar stable, and minimize hunger pangs.

Carbs, Brain Chemistry, and Productivity

The consumption of starchy carbohydrates will tend to increase the brain's level of serotonin, a neurotransmitter known for its calming, and sleep-inducing effects. In contrast, the consumption of protein will increase dopamine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters known for keeping us alert and energized.

If you've had the experience of grabbing a bagel for lunch because it's quick and easy and then found yourself falling asleep at your desk, you know exactly what I mean. We call it a *carb-coma*. If I were a business manager or staff supervisor I would want to increase productivity with the kinds of foods served at business meetings, not put my staff to sleep.

Actions to take:

- ❑ Ask the person responsible for ordering the food for business meetings to include some protein choices at all meetings where food is served. If they are not already doing it they should include some fresh fruit as well. (Yes, fruit is carbohydrate, but it is complex carbohydrate because of the presence of fiber. It is also one of our best sources for vitamins and minerals.)
- ❑ Enlist the aid of coworkers in making the request for protein to be served at business meetings. If need be, put the request in writing and submit it to the CEO of the company.

Are your coworkers making you fat?

When someone makes a notation in their food diary that they had a handful of potato chips at 11 am, and several cookies at 2 pm, the question I typically ask is “Why? What was the cue to eat?” With few exceptions the answer will be “They were on the desk of

the person who works next to me. She always has potato chips on her desk, and I take a few as I walk by.” This is another example of how we allow the environment, and the people in the environment to decide what we will eat, and how much we will weigh.

Some people will argue that those individuals with weight issues should have more will power. If they don't want potato chips, they shouldn't eat them. I disagree. I don't think there is any such thing as will power. Second, I think we have reached a point when America's weight issue must be solved collectively. Being overweight is no longer the exception to the rule; it is the rule.

For now, when you see food on someone's desk I want you to remember how exposed that food is to germs. Just think of the number of times it has been coughed on, or touched by unclean hands. I also want you to ask yourself: “Who's in charge here? Me, or the person who bought those chips?” It is important that you decide *what* you are going to have, and *when*. Don't let your environment decide for you.

Whose birthday is it today?

In most offices it is customary to celebrate someone's birthday with a cake. Typically one day of the week is set aside—Friday afternoon, for example—and everyone gets a slice of cake. This means that in a large office you may be having cake every week. Let's do the math: One slice of chocolate layer cake = 550 calories. 550 calories times 50 weeks a year = 27,500 calories or about 8 pounds.

I am not saying that you can't ever have cake. What I am saying is that your environment is out to fatten you up, and will succeed unless you take control. Do you want cake every Friday? Fine, make room for it. What are you willing to give up to make room for the slice of cake, so that it is not an excess of calories? Are you willing to eat less for dinner? Are you game to skip the bread and the potato that you would normally have?

You can make room for anything that you really want. But you can't have anything in unlimited quantities, nor can you have it all on the same day. Just for today.... decide what you want to have in advance. Plan your food intake, and then stick to your plan.

Is your refrigerator making you fat?

In a perfect world we would eat when we are hungry, and stop when the hunger goes away. Alas, we are more apt to eat in response to an external cue than an internal one. Ever heard that we are all on a seafood diet? Meaning: We see food. We eat it.

You open the refrigerator door to get the container of milk for your tea, and spot the package of cheese on the shelf. So you have a few slices of cheese, rationalizing that you need the snack. You have the cheese, not because your body sent you a message saying it was hungry, but because you saw the cheese.

Actions to take:

- Make everything in your refrigerator invisible. Store foods in opaque covered containers, so that when you open the door you see the container and not the food.

Get rid of anything in the refrigerator that may cause you problems as you go about the process of making changes in your lifestyle.

- ❑ And, while you are cleaning house, go through the cupboards and get rid of the junk. What constitutes junk? Anything in a box or bag, that you can eat directly out of the container without any preparation, such as crackers, potato chips, pretzels, or cookies.

Tip Do you currently consume at least 2-3 servings of fruit per day? If not, put out a fruit bowl, somewhere it will be very visible. If you see it you will eat it.

Is your supermarket making you fat?

You stop off at the grocery store on your way home from work to pick up an item you need, and you spot a box of chocolate covered donuts. You buy the box of donuts on impulse, promising yourself you'll only have one. Can you guess how the story ends? Later, you'll no doubt berate yourself for lack of will power.

There are several things you need to know about supermarkets, starting with the reality that supermarkets only make money if you make purchases, and the more you purchase the more money they make. The layout of the store is designed to encourage impulse purchases. You also need to know that most of the items in the store are not *food* as nature intended us to consume. If you walk up and down the isles in the store you will see row after row of packaged, processed, imitation food items filled with chemicals, preservatives, flavorings, emulsifiers, artificial colors, hydrogenated fats, salt, plus tons of sugar and artificial sweeteners.

In any given year some 500-1000 new food items are introduced to the American public via supermarket shelves. In 2003 the number of new food items exceeded 2000. These products are marketed as fat-free, sugar-free, low-calorie, cholesterol-free, low-carb or high-protein, whatever the *in* gimmick is at the moment. But none of these are really foods, and most of them have no place in the shopping cart of anyone who purports to value health.

Actions to take:

- ❑ Shop from a list. Decide in advance what you need, and then stick to your plan. Don't buy anything that isn't on your list.
- ❑ Walk around the perimeter of the store and stay away from the middle isles. When you enter the store you should walk into the produce department. Load up on fruits and vegetables. Then go to the meat department—I'm using the word meat generically to refer to high protein foods—and then the dairy department. And do buy some eggs. Yes, you can buy canned or frozen vegetables, or things like canned tuna or salmon, or canned beans. It is also okay to include nuts and nut butters on your list, but buy a natural peanut butter, not one that has been hydrogenated.
- ❑ Stay away from the cereal isle, unless you are purchasing whole grains like oatmeal, or brown rice.

- ❑ Don't buy any cereal marketed to children. If it is marketed to children it is junk. If you have children, and if you love them, don't buy them junk.
- ❑ If you choose to buy packaged goods, at least *read the label* first. Know what you are buying. Know how many servings, how many calories per serving, and don't forget to read the list of ingredients.

Tip: Don't buy anything containing hydrogenated fats, or msg, or Aspartame (AKA Nutra-Sweet and Equal.)

Who's in Charge of your Life?

A co-worker walks past your desk with a box of chocolates, and offers you some. You take the chocolates, telling yourself "It's not polite to refuse."

Stop! Who's in charge of your life? When you eat what you see, or what people offer to you, you are allowing the environment to dictate your behavior. You are allowing the environment to decide for you what you will eat, and ultimately, what you will weigh. You are turning the control of your life over to someone or something outside of yourself. It's time to put yourself back in charge.

Keep in mind this is not about donuts, or chocolates. It's about you being in charge. You have absolute control of your eating habits. When you feel out of control, the reality is that you've let go of control. That's the choice that you've made at that moment. It may not be the choice that you approve of, but that's a different issue. There is no force from Mars that puts a gun to your head and forces you to eat.

It's okay to eat, and it's okay to make room in your life for foods that are special or favorites. But you need to decide when and what you will eat. Don't let the world decide for you.

Is Your Environment Making You Fat? Is adapted from **How to Win at Weight Loss** by Jackie Storm PhD, CNS ISBN: 0-9776564-0-3