The battle with food

If you feel like you should be lacing your drinks with kale juice or snacking on chia seeds, you are forgiven because knowing what to eat has become as complex as picking a mobile phone plan. Although TV programs like MasterChef have increased our ‘eating literacy’ so much so that we can now whip up homemade profiteroles and know that confit (pronounced ‘con-fee’) is more than putting on your slippers: the question remains, do we really know what we should be eating?

The increased complexity around food has created a kind of ‘food tension’ that leaves many of us throwing our hands up in despair. This article explores some of the causes of the ‘food battle’.
The changing relationship with food

Just one generation ago it was normal for adults and children to go four to five hours without eating, but today for many of us that rarely happens. We are living in a time of food abundance, where food is pre-prepared and ready to eat at any time. Where once we spent large portions of our day growing, preparing and cooking food, we are now no longer required to do any of these things.

We have more money to buy food, yet increased stressors make the relationship with food complex. We use terms such as ‘comfort food’ and ‘food porn’ which show that food has become more than just nutrients required to sustain life. We eat more and move less, so there is little wonder that over 60% of the Australian population is overweight or obese. We are in the unique predicament that for the first time in history, overconsumption of food is threatening to reduce our lifespan. For many, food is not medicine, rather the cause of ill health. So, what has gone wrong with our eating habits to result in this situation?

Is food addictive?

We are told that our food habits are driven by choice but can food, like nicotine in cigarettes, create a physical need for us to eat particular foods? Highly processed carbohydrates such as soft drinks, chips and desserts are easy to chew, and even entertaining to chew (think of the crunch factor of chips or the bubbles in soft drinks); the intense salty, sweet and stimulating flavours keep us coming back for more. Research has found that these foods cause our blood sugar to fall below fasting levels within a few hours, causing hunger and leading to overeating.

It is better to choose foods that are low GI, which produce gradual rises in blood glucose levels. Low GI foods are more slowly digested and tend to be more filling; they include foods such as wholegrain bread, quinoa, rolled oats, muesli, chickpeas and fruits such as apples, pears and bananas. According to Jean Hailes naturopath and project officer Jess Gleeson, “Some foods are specifically designed by food scientists to leave us wanting more and more – so in that way certain foods can be addictive”.

Food restrictions

A whole new industry has developed encouraging us to take up highly restricted diets. ‘Clean eating’, which encompasses diets such as ‘Paleo’, the sugar free diet, juice fasts and the raw food diet are generally based on the idea of avoiding processed foods. However, these diets can have unhealthy consequences. For example, removing whole food groups such as dairy or grains (Paleo diet) can limit nutrient intake, leading to deficiencies. Also, removing elements of foods in the juicing process can take out components critical to the process of digestion such as fibre and co-nutrients. The juicing of large amounts of fruits in particular can lead to high levels of fructose, which has been shown to lead to weight gain and potentially diabetes.

“If you are making juices and smoothies at home, make sure you balance the fruit with a good portion of vegetables and protein such as yoghurt, nuts and seeds”, Jess recommends.

In addition, adopting highly restricted diets can create an unhealthy relationship with food. So widespread has this trend become that it has been recognised as an eating disorder and given the name ‘orthorexia’ – a preoccupation with avoiding foods considered to be unhealthy. Many of the restrictive diets being promoted today have not been proven to deliver the benefits they claim and may distort our relationship with food. Having a variety of foods, eating regular meals (including wholegrains, fibre, fruit and vegetables), and limiting the amount of fat, sugar and salt you eat are all recommended for good nutrition.

“Healthy foods are the foods your grandparents would recognise and don’t necessarily come with super-food hype claims”, says Jess.

It is clear that to reduce food complexity and to take the ‘battle’ out of food we need to eat for enjoyment, as well as for health. Remember that when it comes to eating healthily, simple eating is often the best.
### Genes and food – new frontiers?

Health practitioners and scientists are exploring a way of seeing food as information, called nutrigenomics. This area of study provides new understandings of how our food intake can influence health by speaking to our genes and triggering messages that create health or disease. Therefore, although you may be born with a genetic tendency towards developing a particular disease, food may either turn on or off the gene expression that can trigger the disease process.

### Tips to help in the battle with food

#### PLAN YOUR SHOPPING AND MEALS

Factor shopping and cooking time into your schedule. Spend a little time each week planning some healthy meals and snacks and then write your shopping list.

#### EAT BREAKFAST

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. If you skip meals it will catch up with you with the 4pm chocolate slump or by overeating in the evenings.

#### STOCK UP ON KEY INGREDIENTS

Keep basic ingredients in your cupboard for quick, healthy meals.

#### KEEP HEALTHY SNACKS IN SIGHT

Snack on fresh fruit or unsalted nuts and put away the chocolates or biscuits. Try not to graze; instead, stop and have a definite snack time when you need it.

#### TREATS CAN BE HEALTHY

Treat yourself to luscious berries or a mango that will satisfy your sweet tooth, instead of a chocolate bar or muffin.

#### USE FOOD LABELS TO IDENTIFY THE HEALTHIER OPTIONS

Compare the products available in the supermarket and aim to choose those with a lower saturated fat, higher fibre, lower sugar and lower sodium content.

#### TRY SOMETHING NEW

For inspiration, visit the local farmers market or food market to buy fresh seasonal produce. Have a look at healthy food magazines or recipe websites for some meal ideas.

#### DON’T SHOP ON AN EMPTY STOMACH

Eat before you shop and you will be less tempted by unhealthy foods.

#### DON’T CONFUSE HUNGER WITH THIRST

Stop using food and coffee to keep going – take a quick break, stretch and drink a glass of water.

#### ASK FOR SMALLER AND HEALTHIER OPTIONS

Ask for smaller portions and make fruit and vegetables your number one choice in a meal whether eating at home or eating out. Ditch rich sauces and sides of chips or bread.

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