

## Adverse effects of consuming high fat-sugar diets on cognition: implications for understanding obesity

Article (Accepted Version)

Yeomans, Martin (2017) Adverse effects of consuming high fat-sugar diets on cognition: implications for understanding obesity. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 76 (4). pp. 455-465. ISSN 0029-6651

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**Adverse effects of consuming high fat-sugar diets on cognition:  
implications for understanding obesity.**

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**Short title:** Effects of Western diet consumption on memory

**Keywords:** diet, memory, cognition, obesity

1 **Abstract**

2 There is increasing evidence for important roles of key cognitive processes, including  
3 attention, memory and learning, in the short-term decision making around eating. There  
4 is parallel evidence that people who are overweight or obese tend to perform worse on  
5 a variety of cognitive tasks. In this review, the evidence for these two ideas is  
6 summarised and then the idea that overconsumption of Western-style high-fat high-  
7 sugar diets may underlie the association between obesity and poorer cognitive  
8 performance is explored. In particular, evidence in animals and humans that repeated  
9 consumption of high fat or high fat and sugar diets leads to specific impairments in the  
10 functioning of the hippocampus which underpin the consequent changes in cognition is  
11 summarised. These findings lead into the vicious cycle model, which suggests that  
12 these cognitive changes have knock-on negative effects for future appetite control, and  
13 evidence that altered hippocampal function is also associated with impaired appetite  
14 control is explored. The review concludes that there is consistent evidence in the animal  
15 literature and emerging evidence from human studies that supports this vicious cycle  
16 model. It is also noted, however, that to date studies lack the nutritional specificity  
17 needed to be able to translate these basic research findings into clear nutritional effects,  
18 and concludes that there is an urgent need for additional research to clarify the precise  
19 nature of the apparent effects of consuming high fat and sugar diets on cognition.  
20

21 **Introduction**

22 Historically, the study of human appetite control has been dominated by theories based  
23 around the sensing of nutritional status and the use of these sensed signals to either  
24 promote a desire to eat (hunger signals) or suppress that desire (satiety signals). There  
25 is a great deal of evidence confirming that such signals play an important role in appetite  
26 control, and the underlying peripheral and neural signals that influence eating have been  
27 well characterized (1-3). However, homeostatic models are increasingly recognised as  
28 inadequate explanations of everyday eating behaviour, particularly because of the  
29 worldwide increase in incidence of obesity driven by over-consumption. The  
30 prevailing view is that short-term appetite control involves a balance between  
31 responding to homeostatic controls arising from internal nutrient-derived signals and  
32 external signals that can over-ride homeostatic control (4-6). Eating can thus be viewed  
33 as decision making around food based on a balance between immediate rewards and  
34 homeostatic needs.

35

36 Ultimately starting or stopping eating is a decision, and these decisions are informed by  
37 a wide range of factors, certainly including physiological cues arising from detection  
38 of signals arising from sensing of nutrient status (interoceptive signals), but also by  
39 external factors including the social context of eating (7, 8), the palatability of the food  
40 on offer (9-11), the served portion size (12-15), etc.. Thus understanding the cognitive  
41 processes that underlie the decision making around meal-initiation, meal-size etc. offers  
42 the potential for new insights into human appetite control, and consequently the  
43 potential to develop more effective treatment approaches for those who struggle to  
44 regulate their appetite. But our cognitive functioning is in turn influenced by nutritional  
45 status, and in this review the focus is on one such influence, the growing evidence that  
46 repeated consumption of diets with higher levels of fat and sugar (high-fat sugar diets,  
47 HFS) alter specific functioning in key areas of the brain involved in memory, and that  
48 consequently HFS diets lead to impaired cognition which in turn leads to poor decision  
49 making around eating. To date, however, the evidence for the effects of HFS diets have  
50 largely come from animal models (see 16, 17). Here the focus is primarily on growing  
51 evidence for similar effects in studies with human volunteers.

52

53

54 **The role of cognition in appetite control**

55 To set the potential impact of HFS diets on cognition and appetite into context, first it  
56 is important to consider the wider role of cognition in appetite control. Many cognitive  
57 processes are involved in decision making around meals. The extent to which we are  
58 aware of food cues in the environment (attention) has long been hypothesised as a key  
59 component of our sensitivity to external drivers of ingestion (18). But more recent work  
60 (19) has focussed on our ability to recall in the short-term what we have recently eaten  
61 and to adjust our subsequent eating accordingly (memory). Memory is also key to how  
62 we identify the foods we consume (20), and even modifies our perception of flavour  
63 (21). And these memories are laid down through learning processes which integrate  
64 sensory and nutrient information through experience (22, 23). Each of these four  
65 aspects of cognition are reviewed here in brief to set the broader context for the potential  
66 way HFS diet consumption may impact on cognitive controls of ingestion.

67

### 68 ***The role of memory in appetite control***

69 The idea that memory for recent eating events was a critical determinant of the decision  
70 to start and end a meal came to the fore with Rozin's (24) seminal study of eating in  
71 two amnesic patients. These patients failed to remember they had just eaten, and so  
72 accepted and consumed a second lunch served soon after a first lunch. An elegant series  
73 of studies lead by Higgs has demonstrated that this is not down to aberrant appetite in  
74 amnesia: healthy volunteers who are directed to recall the lunch they had earlier reliably  
75 eat less in a mid-afternoon snack intake test than do controls in other recall conditions  
76 (25-28). It is also well established that people consume more when distracted than  
77 when their attention is on eating (see 19). Notably, recall of intake is poorer for food  
78 consumed under distraction (27), while focussing on eating during lunch increases  
79 memory and reduces later intake (25). Taken together, these lines of evidence provide  
80 strong evidence for an important role for memory in short-term intake regulation.

### 81 ***Attention to food cues as clues to underlying eating motivation***

82 Since humans are born with no innate attraction to any specific foods beyond a tendency  
83 to like those with sweet tastes, our preferences develop through learning about the  
84 short-term effects of consuming different items (22). Once we have acquired these  
85 associations, cues which predict the presence of foods in our environment are more  
86 likely to attract attention. Consequently, the study of the extent to which we attend to  
87 food cues can give insights into underlying eating motivation. For example, it has been  
88 repeatedly shown that healthy normal-weight participants pay greater attention to food

89 cues when hungry than when sated (29-32). Overweight and/or obesity individuals,  
90 however, have been shown to attend more strongly to food-related cues (typically  
91 pictures of food, 33-41) than do normal-weight controls. Moreover, studies have  
92 suggested attention to food is maintained even when sated in obese individuals (36).  
93 These effects of weight-status on attention to foods are further complicated by effects  
94 of dieting and weight dissatisfaction, with individuals with a history of dieting or weight  
95 dissatisfaction also showing greater attention to food cues (42, 43). Taken together,  
96 these data suggest that cognitive systems involved in selective and sustained attention  
97 play a key role in both normal appetite control and over-eating. They also demonstrate  
98 how our individual attention to food reflects a balance of motives for eating, partly  
99 derived from homeostatic signalling, but also influenced by both the rewarding  
100 consequences of eating and weight-related concerns about the effects of eating. Thus  
101 attention may reflect the momentary integration of eating motivation derived from the  
102 processing of multiple signals.

103 ***The role of learning in development of food preferences and the control of appetite.***

104 Attention to food cues involves recognition of external cues that map onto our  
105 individual memories. These memories are acquired through a lifetime of exposure to  
106 foods and learning of what items are safe to eat or not, and what nutritional value we  
107 obtain from consumption. There is neither scope or relevance to fully explore the  
108 mechanisms of learning underpinning the development of our food preferences, which  
109 have been reviewed elsewhere (22, 44), but it is important to remember that these  
110 learning processes are likely to be impaired by changes to the neural systems which  
111 subserve learning and memory, including the hippocampus. In particular, animal  
112 studies strongly suggest that the hippocampus plays a key role in detection and  
113 integration of interoceptive signals into learned responses (45), an idea developed more  
114 fully later in this review. It is also notable that expression of learned preferences is  
115 sensitive to acute hunger state in healthy normal weight individuals (46, 47), but these  
116 types of learning may be disrupted by dieting (48, 49). The dependence of learning on  
117 memory for interoceptive experience post-ingestion (22) also suggests that impaired  
118 memory will interfere with these learning processes, suggesting that flavour preference  
119 acquisition may be less regulated by post-ingestive experience in obesity.

120

121 **Obesity, memory and cognition**

122 The previous section highlights, in brief, the importance of three aspects of cognition  
123 in control of appetite. Critical to the present review, however, is the idea that  
124 overconsumption of HFS diets can impact on brain function and so alter cognition. The  
125 argument then follows that these nutritionally-derived changes in brain function in turn  
126 impair short-term appetite control through the consequent changes in cognition: a  
127 vicious cycle model (16, 17) described later in more detail. For such a model to have  
128 any explanatory power for human overeating there has to be evidence that people who  
129 overeat show poorer memory, and there is growing evidence that this is so. Firstly,  
130 there are specific cognitive impairments associated with obesity. This has been found  
131 both in cross-sectional studies (50, 51), and more crucially in longitudinal studies (52).  
132 For example, a recent study showed that performance on a novel visual episodic  
133 memory task decreased as a function of body mass index (53), with significant  
134 impairments on all aspects of this novel memory task with increasing BMI (Figure 1).  
135 It is notable that this study only measured overall BMI, and whether the reported  
136 memory impairment was more associated with weight or overall fat content cannot be  
137 determined, and warrants further investigation. Other studies report explicit memory  
138 deficits in obese populations: for example, explicit memory deficits were found in one  
139 quarter of obese participants who were about to undergo bariatric surgery, with memory  
140 improving post-surgery (54). Recovery in this context could be due to altered diet,  
141 reduced weight or reduced body fat. Further evidence for a specific memory  
142 impairment associated with obesity came from a more recent study that contrasted a  
143 variety of measures of cognitive performance, including working memory, between  
144 obese and normal weight groups (55). The outcome suggested impaired working  
145 memory associated with obesity, but also found evidence of impairments in learning,  
146 particularly for negative outcomes. Some studies have found more general impaired  
147 cognitive function or impaired executive function associated with increased body  
148 weight, BMI or obesity (56, 57) although one study found that obesity was associated  
149 with improved overall cognitive function in older adults (58). The current consensus  
150 however is that overweight and obesity tend to be associated with poorer memory  
151 performance, consistent with the idea that overconsuming HFS diets impairs memory,  
152 but not providing direct evidence for the HFS association per se.

153  
154  
155

156

157 **Evidence for specific effects of diets high in fat and sugar on memory**

158 *Animal studies*

159 The clearest evidence for an effect of consuming HFS diets and impaired memory  
160 comes from studies with non-human animals. A full review of this literature is beyond  
161 the scope of this paper, and has been subject to several recent critical reviews (16, 17).  
162 In brief, the basic design of studies in this area involves measuring different aspects of  
163 memory performance for rodents who are fed either a HFS or control diet. Using this  
164 approach, extended exposure to HFS diets has been shown to impair performance on  
165 tasks which have been implicated in hippocampal-dependent spatial memory, like the  
166 Radial Arm Maze or the Morris water bath (59-64). What is striking in these animal  
167 studies is that the impairment in memory is specific to spatial tasks, whereas other  
168 measures such as object recognition remain relatively unimpaired (65). This can be  
169 seen in Figure 2: performance (measured as exploration time) is impaired for rats placed  
170 on a HFS diet on a spatial (Figure 2A) but not object recognition (Figure 2B) task.  
171 These spatial memory deficits also emerge rapidly, with recent studies finding deficits  
172 emerging soon after being placed on the HFS diet (61, 65-67), as can be seen in Figure  
173 2. Thus, the evidence that consuming Western-style HFS diets impair hippocampal-  
174 dependent memory tasks in animals is strong, and is further backed up by evidence of  
175 changes to the hippocampus itself, described in detail in several recent reviews (16, 17,  
176 68, 69), but beyond the scope of this review.

177

178 *Human studies*

179 Most studies of effects of consuming a Western-style HFS diet on memory and broader  
180 cognitive performance have tended to rely on associations in cross-sectional studies.  
181 Studies of this kind have provided evidence consistent with the idea that consuming a  
182 HFS diet impairs memory, but because of the cross-sectional nature of the data these  
183 studies do not provide the same strong test of causation that is seen in the rodent  
184 literature. That said, the evidence is largely in line with what would be predicted from  
185 the animal findings. In terms of effects of high intake of saturated fat (SF), a cross-  
186 sectional study of middle-aged (45-60 year olds) using an extensive cognitive battery  
187 as part of a larger cohort study found an association between SF intake and increased  
188 risk of impaired cognitive functions, including memory, speed and flexibility (70).  
189 Notably, that study was conducted in the context of examining potential beneficial

190 effects of intake of omega 3 fatty acids, an issue discussed in greater detail later. A  
191 similar study which examined effects of intake of different types of fat on cognitive  
192 performance in an older cohort (65 years +) also reported greater cognitive decline over  
193 time in participants with higher SF intake (71). These large cohort data are further  
194 supported by a more recent but smaller study contrasting effects of fat intake on  
195 memory in younger women (72). Again, habitual fat intake was associated with  
196 specific memory impairments (poorer word recall and recognition, impaired  
197 performance on a visuo-spatial task).

198

199 More in line with the animal approach was a study which contrasted cognitive  
200 performance between individuals classified as having “whole food” or “processed  
201 food” diets based on analysis of 4,693 participants from the Whitehall cohort study  
202 (73). The processed food group had increased risk of cognitive deficit, including poorer  
203 memory, whereas the whole food group had reduced risk, although controlling for  
204 potential confounders (socioeconomic status, education etc.) reduced the significance.  
205 In a different approach, Francis and Stevenson (74) developed a modified food  
206 frequency questionnaire to estimate HFS diet intake, and then examined how  
207 performance on standardised memory tasks (verbal paired associates, VPA, and the  
208 logical memory subtests from the Wechsler Memory Scale, LMWMS) varied as a  
209 function of HFS. The Dietary Fat and Free Sugar Questionnaire (DFSQ) assesses  
210 frequency of consumption of 26 foods and drinks that are high in saturated fat and/or  
211 added sugar, and has been shown to be a fairly reliable measure of actual intake of high-  
212 fat and sweetened products (75). In line with animal data, higher HFS intake was  
213 associated with poorer performance on these memory tasks, but not on other tasks (the  
214 Trail Making Test and the Wisconsin Card Sort Test). Since both VPA and LMWMS  
215 tasks have been shown to be impaired in patients with hippocampal damage, whereas  
216 the other tasks measure frontal executive function, these associations provide support  
217 for the idea that HFS intake is associated with impaired memory through an impact on  
218 the hippocampus, although they are again based on an association rather than a clear  
219 causal test. These findings were replicated in a follow-up study (76), again with higher  
220 HFS intake correlating with poorer performance on the LMWMS. A more recent study  
221 by the same group provided further evidence of effects of HFS on memory (77). Here,  
222 healthy volunteers who varied in their habitual HFS consumption measured using the  
223 DFSQ completed the verbal paired associate (VPA) test, which is well established to

224 involve the hippocampus. In line with previous findings, performance on the VPA  
225 decreased as a function of HFS score. Thus there is growing body of evidence from  
226 cross-sectional studies relating HFS diets to impaired memory. The idea that HFS diets  
227 directly impact on hippocampal function was further supported by the finding that a  
228 standardized measure of consumption of a Western-style diet was associated with  
229 decreased overall volume of the left hippocampus in a sample of 255 middle-aged men  
230 (78). However, all of the studies discussed so far report associations between HFS or  
231 Western-style diets and memory or hippocampal function: thus these studies are  
232 consistent with the broader idea that these diets impair hippocampal function but cannot  
233 establish causation.

234

235 The most convincing test for the theory that intake of HFS diets impairs hippocampal  
236 function would be to examine changes in hippocampal sensitive memory tasks before  
237 and after an intervention where the proportion of HFS in the diet was artificially  
238 increased or decreased. Such tests raise obvious ethical issues, and there have been few  
239 studies which have attempted to do so to date. One study that used this approach (79)  
240 did find impaired cognitive function (increased reaction time and impaired attention)  
241 after placing 20 healthy volunteers on a high fat diet for seven days, although they did  
242 not include any specific hippocampal-dependent memory tests. Placing healthy young  
243 men on a high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet for five days also impaired attention, but also  
244 showed a deterioration in speed of retrieval from short-term memory (80). Thus both  
245 studies suggest similarly acute effects of consuming high fat diets on cognitive  
246 performance that has been reported in animal studies, although some caution is needed  
247 in interpretation since both studies were small.

248

249 Overall current human data is consistent with the broader idea that repeated  
250 consumption of Western-style HFS diets may impair cognitive function, possibly  
251 through a particular action on the hippocampus, but more studies are needed to fully  
252 characterise these effects and establish greater specificity and causation.

253

#### 254 **The vicious cycle model**

255 The argument that changes in function of the hippocampus brought about by habitual  
256 over-consumption of Western-style HFS diets promotes unhealthy diet choice has been  
257 encapsulated in the Vicious Cycle mode (VCM) developed by Davidson and colleagues

258 (16, 81-83). The essential argument underlying the VCM (Figure 3) is that the  
259 hippocampus plays a key role in the decisions to start and end meals. Feeding on HFS  
260 diets is then hypothesised to promote overconsumption and consequent weight gain,  
261 and also leads to alterations in hippocampal function. It is then argued that these  
262 changes in the hippocampus disrupt normal controls of ingestion leading, so promoting  
263 continued over-consumption, leading to a vicious cycle of further overeating. The  
264 implication is that once an individual has overconsumed sufficient HFS diet to impair  
265 hippocampal functioning, the resulting damage to the hippocampus and consequent  
266 alterations in cognitive functions make it harder to make the necessary changes in  
267 behaviour to reduce intake and adopt a healthier diet. Critical to the VCM is the idea  
268 that the hippocampus plays a key role in control of normal food intake (82, 84-88) as  
269 well as its more widely known role in memory (89-91). The evidence for a role of the  
270 hippocampus in control of feeding comes largely from animal studies. For example,  
271 rats with lesions to the hippocampus took smaller more frequent meals than do normal  
272 rats (92), while temporary inactivation of the hippocampus also reduced the intermeal  
273 interval (93). But the evidence reviewed earlier of a key role of short-term memory in  
274 normal control of appetite in humans is consistent with this. What is now needed is a  
275 critical evaluation of the extent to which the key changes in behaviour proposed by the  
276 VCM, and evidenced in animals, is also seen in studies with humans.

277

### 278 **The vicious cycle model: evidence from studies of human eating behaviour**

279 The evidence of impaired memory associated with HFS diet consumption reviewed  
280 earlier implicates the hippocampus in short-term memory impairment. However, the  
281 VCM suggests that these apparent changes to hippocampal function then alters key  
282 aspects of appetite control. Of these, two aspects have been examined in recent studies:  
283 decreased sensitivity to interoceptive cues and reduced inhibitory control. While  
284 current evidence is still limited, these recent studies provide some support for what is  
285 proposed in the VCM.

286

287 The first aspect of the VCM that has been looked at is the extent to which the effects of  
288 HFS on memory also impacts on awareness of interoceptive cues associated with  
289 eating. Studies in animals have shown a critical role for the hippocampus in integrating  
290 the use of interoceptive cues in control of feeding (94, 95). In humans, high scores on  
291 the DFS in a normal-weight population were associated with reduced sensitivity to

292 internal hunger/satiety cues, evidenced by altered effects of ingestion on the experience  
293 of appetite in those with high HFS intake (74). Similarly, DFS scores were associated  
294 with smaller reductions in ratings of incentive but not hedonic motivations to eat in a  
295 state of satiety (77). These measures were derived from ratings of food liking and desire  
296 to eat at the start and end of lunch: both ratings declined overall, but the rate of decrease  
297 for the desire to eat measure was markedly slower for those with high HFS intake.  
298 These results are further supported in a study which tested the extent to which habitual  
299 HFS intake in a healthy normal-weight population were related to sensitivity to thirst-  
300 related interoceptive cues (76). Here, changes in thirst sensations after a thirst-inducing  
301 challenge (eating salty crisps) decreased as a function of increased HFS intake,  
302 interpreted as further evidence of poorer interoceptive awareness in HFS consumers.

303

304 A second key prediction from the VCM is that people who habitually consume  
305 excessive amounts of HFS diets will also display poorer impulse control. In parallel to  
306 the development of the VCM here has been a large increase in interest in the role of  
307 impulsivity as a risk factor for development of obesity, based on the idea that the risky  
308 decision making and emphasis on short-term rewards which are key features of  
309 impulsivity could contribute to the poor dietary choices that underlie overeating and  
310 HFS consumption. There is now a wealth of studies reporting that higher measures of  
311 impulsivity are associated with obesity (96-100) and uncontrolled eating (101). None  
312 of those studies specifically assessed habitual HFS intake, however a recent study  
313 reported an association between HFS intake measured using the DFSQ (102). They  
314 reported that HFS intake was associated with higher scores on two standardised  
315 measures of impulsivity: overall scores on the Barratt Impulsivity Scale and the  
316 Urgency measure from the Urgency, Premeditation, Perseverance and Sensation  
317 Seeking questionnaire.

318

319 The VCM also has other testable implications for human ingestion which remain  
320 largely unexplored. There is now considerable scope for new research to clarify the  
321 full extent to which habitual dietary patterns around HFS consumption do cause long-  
322 term changes in cognitive function which in turn makes it harder to self-regulate  
323 appetite and food choice.

324

325 **A brief word on mechanism**

326 How then might excessive intake of HFS diets alter hippocampal function? Based on  
327 extensive research in animals, evidence of three potential mechanisms has emerged and  
328 these have been reviewed in detail elsewhere (16, 17, 68). A number of potential  
329 mechanisms have been identified, and here the three where there appears to strongest  
330 evidence is briefly summarised: neuroinflammation, effects on the blood-brain barrier  
331 and altered levels of Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF).

332

333 The idea that specific responses to diet can lead to an inflammatory response is well  
334 established: inflammatory responses, particularly chronic low-grade inflammation,  
335 have been implicated in many diet-related diseases, including heart disease (e.g. 103,  
336 104, 105), diabetes (see 106, 107) and depression (e.g. 108). Many studies have found  
337 higher levels of inflammatory markers in obese than normal weight participants (see  
338 109, 110, 111). It has also been argued, with considerable evidence, that inflammation  
339 may be a key link between obesity and diabetes (112), and that this damage in turn  
340 alters subsequent food intake regulation (16, 113). In the present context, the key  
341 findings come principally from studies with animals that show increased levels of  
342 inflammatory markers for rats placed on HFS diets (see 63), and particularly evidence  
343 of specific neuroinflammatory responses in the hippocampus (114-116). Thus diet-  
344 induced inflammation provides a potential explanation for the specific impact of HF  
345 and HFS diets on hippocampal-dependent cognitive processes.

346

347 One of the potential explanations for how neuroinflammation alters hippocampal  
348 function might be through changes in levels of BDNF. BDNF acts to support the  
349 differentiation of neurons, and crucially is abundant in the hippocampus. BDNF plays  
350 a key role in long-term memory (see 117, 118), and so any changes in BDNF are likely  
351 to also affect memory and so appear a prime candidate as a link between the diet-  
352 induced changes in hippocampal function and memory highlighted in this review.  
353 There is now considerable evidence for alterations in hippocampal BDNF in animals  
354 fed HF or HFS diets (see 16). For example, rats consuming a HFS diet had reduced  
355 BDNF in the ventral hippocampus, alongside hippocampal-dependent changes in  
356 cognitive performance (119). Other studies also found reduced hippocampal BDNF in  
357 animals consuming HF or HFS diets (59, 120). Together, these studies clearly  
358 implicate changes in BDNF in diet-induced hippocampal dysfunction, although what  
359 causes the changes in BDNF needs to be clarified.

360

361 The selectivity of the semipermeable blood-brain barrier separates the brain from  
362 circulating blood, so protecting the brain from circulating pathogens. It is then  
363 surprising that the effectiveness of the blood-brain barrier can be affected by diet. For  
364 example, mid-life BMI predicted the integrity of the blood-brain barrier 24 years later,  
365 with higher BMI associated with less effective blood-brain barriers in these women  
366 (121). That study does not directly implicate diet, although higher BMI would be  
367 expected to relate to higher intake. Animal studies have however reported specific  
368 deficits in the blood-brain barrier for rats maintained on HFS (122) or HF high-  
369 cholesterol (123) diets. Thus repeated consumption of these types of diet do appear to  
370 impair the effectiveness of the blood-brain barrier.

371

372 So far there is evidence for three potential explanations for the effects of Western-style  
373 HF or HFS diets on hippocampal function: whether these act independently or are  
374 related (for example reduced effectiveness of the blood brain barrier contributing to  
375 local inflammation which might reduce BDNF production) remains unknown. But they  
376 do offer plausible and testable mechanisms that could underpin the cognitive deficits.

377

### 378 **The cause of hippocampal changes: diets, nutrients or adiposity?**

379 A weakness in this research area to date is the poor specification of what dietary  
380 changes are involved. Animal studies use diets with high levels of added (typically  
381 saturated) fat and/or sugar: whether it is the effects of overconsuming the enhanced  
382 elements of these diets or consequent dilution of other features of the diet that are key  
383 to the observed effects needs to be clarified. Of particular relevance is the nature of the  
384 fats in the diet, since there is evidence that omega 3 fats in particular may act to reduce  
385 inflammation (e.g. 124, 125), and increasing saturated fat content of a diet may act to  
386 alter the proportion of omega 3 indirectly, for example. Thus there is urgent need to  
387 examine the specificity of the dietary changes observed in the animal studies that  
388 largely underpin this research area. A further issue in interpretation of the animal  
389 studies is that these diets also lead to increased body-weight, and determining whether  
390 the inflammatory responses etc. are then a direct consequence of the diet or adiposity  
391 cannot be easily determined.

392

393 Human studies to date are essentially based on the relative proportion of HFS foods in  
394 an individual's diet estimated from self-report food frequency measures. That  
395 replicable behavioural findings emerge from this simple measure implies that more  
396 highly specified dietary analyses may be able to identify more specifically what dietary  
397 features are critical. A key feature of the main human studies (74, 76, 77), however, is  
398 that they are able to dissociate the effects of diet from the potential confound of  
399 adiposity, since all of these studies were in normal-weight volunteers and the critical  
400 relationships between behavioural measures and HFS intake were still evident once  
401 BMI had been controlled for.

402

### 403 **Future directions**

404 This short review highlights the current state of knowledge of the potential impact of  
405 Western diets on cognition and consequently on appetite. But it also highlights major  
406 shortcomings in our current understanding. Most critical is the lack of dietary  
407 specificity in the studies underpinning research findings in this area to date. There is  
408 now a real opportunity to data-mine existing longitudinal studies which hold nutritional  
409 and cognitive measures to test the hypotheses generated from the current findings in a  
410 more representative large population. Such analyses could potentially dissociate more  
411 fully effects of diet per se from weight gain, and identify whether it is excess of certain  
412 foodtypes or nutrients that are the key risks for cognitive impairment. There is also a  
413 need to test in humans more of the predictions from the VCM: what is the impact of  
414 HFS consumption on food-related reward and attention, for example. The ideas and  
415 hypotheses in this area are intriguing, and have the potential to make major advances  
416 in our understanding of causes and consequences of overeating, and warrant urgent  
417 further investigation.

418

419

### 420 **Concluding remarks**

421 This brief review summarised the importance of cognitive factors in human appetite  
422 control and then speculated how changes in a core brain area associated with cognition,  
423 and particularly memory, may be disrupted by habitual overconsumption of energy-  
424 dense HFS diets. The animal research in this area is persuasive in terms of the  
425 specificity of the effects on the hippocampus, but is less impressive in considering the  
426 nutritional specification of the diets that have these effects. Human research in this area

427 is emerging, and is consistent with the broad findings from the animal models, however.  
428 The overall conclusion would be that excessive intake of readily metabolized nutrients  
429 may lead to a sub-clinical inflammatory response which in turn may impair  
430 performance of key areas of the brain. The consequent changes in cognition in turn  
431 impair the ability to engage with the healthy lifestyle needed to reverse the effects.  
432 Research is now needed to test these ideas more broadly, and consider how these ideas  
433 may be valuable in novel approaches to countering the obesity crisis.  
434

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752 **Figure legends**

753

754 Figure 1. Associations between BMI and performance on a novel spatial test of  
755 episodic memory (the what where when task), redrawn from Cheke, Simons (53), with  
756 permission.

757

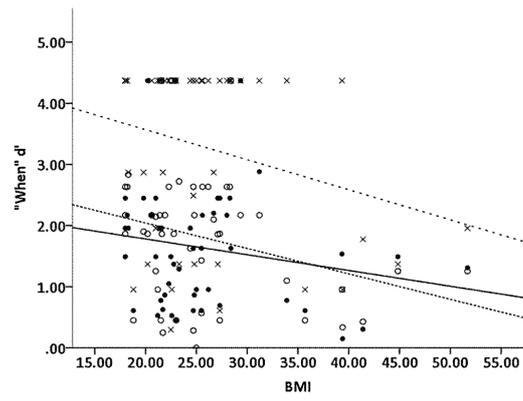
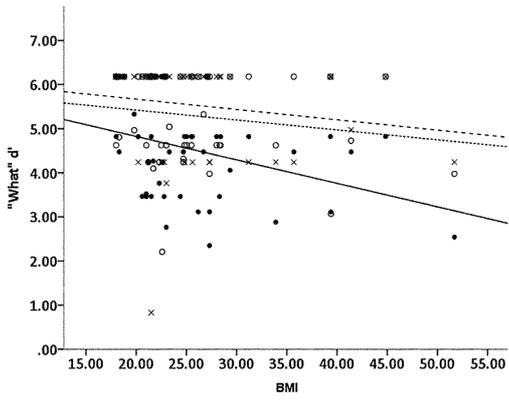
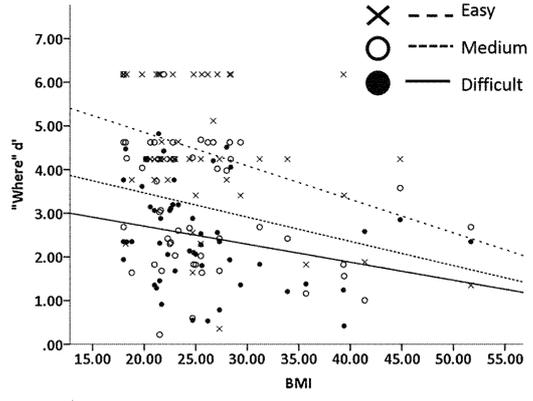
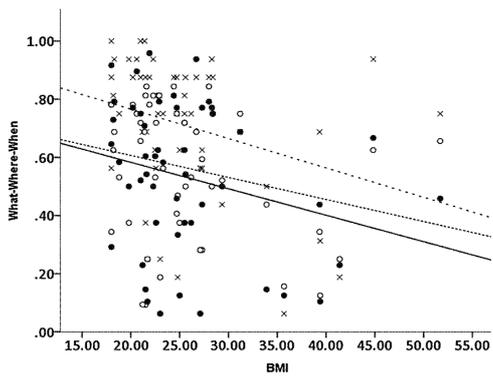
758 Figure 2. Performance on (A) a spatial (place recognition) and (B) non-spatial (object  
759 recognition) task for rats fed a chow (○●○) or high-fat-high-sugar diet

760 (●●●). Higher exploration proportion values reflect better memory. Figure adapted  
761 from data in (65) with permission.

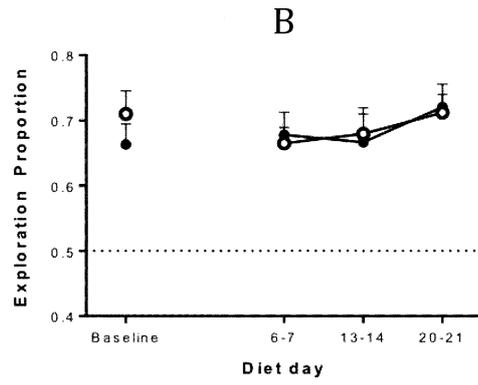
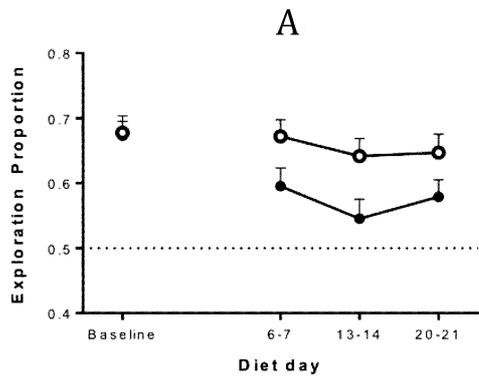
762

763 Figure 3. A schematic summary of the Vicious Cycle model proposed by Davidson  
764 and colleagues, adapted from (17).

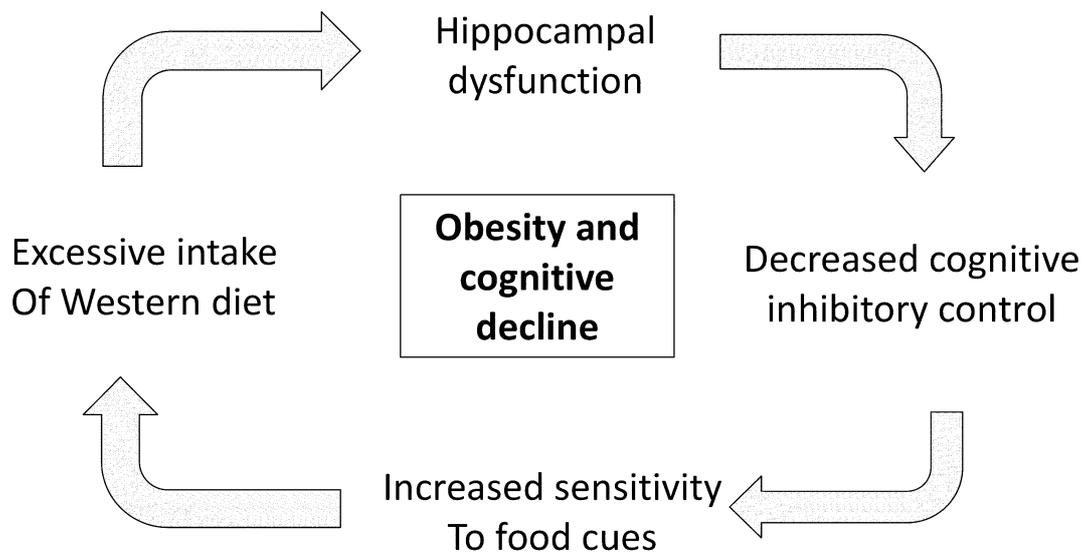
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