



THE HUNGER GAMES

We're often told to eat when hungry and stop when full. But our relationship with food is frequently so battered that that is not simple advice. Lisa Jackson asks the experts how we can learn to read our bodies' signals for hunger and fullness and distinguish them from an emotional need for food

Knowing when to eat should be the most natural thing in the world – after all, within minutes of being born, babies often start to breastfeed. So how come so many of us have lost touch with hunger and find it hard to tell when we're really hungry, something that's a major contributing factor to the obesity epidemic that's sweeping the Western world?

Firstly, it's helpful to understand how the hunger mechanism actually works. "There are two hormones that impact on hunger: ghrelin and leptin," says John Brewer, professor of applied sport science at St Mary's University, Twickenham. "Ghrelin is released when your stomach is empty and acts on your brain to stimulate hunger, but its release ceases when your stomach is stretched and full. Leptin is released by your fat cells and acts on your brain to suppress appetite." According to weight-loss expert Janet Thomson (theplacebodiet.co.uk), the author of *The Placebo Diet*, in a healthy individual these two hormones work in conjunction with each other to ensure we eat what we need to and stop when we've had enough.

All too often, however, this feedback mechanism gets thrown into disarray. "Lack of sleep and changes in time zone or in our eating habits can disrupt our bodies' circadian rhythms which regulate the release and suppression of hormones depending on the time of day," says Brewer. "This is one reason why it's important to establish a healthy daily routine that should include regular meals at set times."

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT

If our blood glucose levels drop, that can also stimulate hunger. "If you have too little glucose, your brain cannot function, hence, when your body senses that your blood sugar is low, you feel hungry and reach for something such as a chocolate bar to elevate it as speedily as possible," says Thomson. "However," says personal trainer Julia Buckley (juliabuckley.co.uk), the author of *The Fat Burn Revolution*, "one of the problems with having a sugary treat is that it'll cause your blood sugar levels to rocket. Your body will go into overdrive, because of the sheer volume of energy you just shovelled in, by releasing lots of insulin to get this energy overload out of your bloodstream and