

If they appeal to our old primate weakness by tasting 'super-sweet', we will lap them up and so stuff ourselves with them that we have little room left for anything else: thus the balance of our diet can be upset. This applies especially in the case of growing children. In an earlier chapter I mentioned recent research which has shown that the preference for sweet and fruity odours falls off dramatically at puberty, when there is a shift in favour of flowery, oily and musky odours. The juvenile weakness for sweetness can be easily exploited, and frequently is.

Adults face another danger. Because their food is in general made so tasty-so much more tasty than it would be in nature-its palatability value rises sharply, and eating responses are overstimulated. The result is in many cases an unhealthy overweight condition. To counteract this, all kinds of bizarre 'dieting' regimes are invented. The 'patients' are told to eat this or that, cut down on this or on that, or to exercise in various ways. Unfortunately there is only one true answer to the problem: to eat less. It works like a charm, but since the subject remains surrounded by super-palatability signals, it is difficult for him, or her, to maintain this course of action for any length of time. The overweight individual is also bedevilled by a further complication. I mentioned earlier the phenomenon of 'displacement activities'-trivial, irrelevant actions performed as tension-relievers in moments of stress. As we saw, a very frequent and common form of displacement activity is 'displacement feeding'. In tense moments we nibble small morsels of food or sip unneeded drinks. This may help to relax the tension in us, but it also helps us to put on weight, especially as the 'trivial' nature of the displacement feeding action usually means that we select for the purpose something sweet. If practised repeatedly over a long period, this leads to the well-known condition of 'fat anxiety', and we can witness the gradual emergence of the familiar, rounded contours of guilt-edged insecurity. For such a person, slimming routines will work only if accompanied by other behavioural changes that reduce the initial state of tension. The role of chewing-gum deserves a mention