



Get off those scales!

EXPERTS SAY WE ARE GENETICALLY PROGRAMMED TO BE A CERTAIN WEIGHT. SO, MAKE YOUR LIFE DIET-FREE AND ENJOY IT!

BY ARIANA FABRIS

diets are nutritionally inadequate, expensive, boring and difficult to sustain long term. "Too many people have unrealistic expectations when they diet," says Melbourne dietitian Melanie McGrice. "Do they really expect to live the rest of their lives on rice and steamed vegetables?"

But there may be another reason why we can't shift those stubborn kilos. Some experts believe the answer lies in our own bodies' biology. They've even given it a name: set point theory.

WHAT IS SET POINT THEORY?

The set point theory of weight is well established amongst health professionals, and put simply, states that all of us have a particular weight range that our bodies have been genetically programmed to keep within. In other words, if your "set point" lies somewhere between sixty and sixty-five kilos, your body will actually fight to maintain that weight – no matter how often you diet, how much exercise you do, or how long you starve yourself on cottage cheese and celery sticks. Try going below your set point, and your body immediately swings into action, creating a drive to eat that is almost impossible to ignore. Defying what nature has given you will leave you pretty much destined for a life of miserable (and useless) yo-yo dieting – and perhaps even put yourself at risk of developing a dangerous eating disorder.

Why do our bodies work so vigorously to defend our set point? Josephine

Gibson, community education officer at the EDFV and also a dietitian, explains: "When your body doesn't receive enough energy from a diet, it goes into a "starvation" type mode, which relates back to our ancestors who survived on a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and sometimes went long periods without food. Our metabolism (the body's energy-burning activities) slows down and the body begins to store any energy it receives as a reserve for the future."

So, our bodies are just trying to protect us. They can't distinguish between going on a diet and actual famine – and they certainly don't care about current trends in fashion, or what today's society has deemed to be the ideal body shape.

Just how well established is set point theory, and does it really exist? Melanie McGrice believes it does, but concedes that environment probably also plays a part in determining an individual's weight. "Today, people in Australia on average are much heavier than they were fifty years ago, yet our genes haven't changed," she points out. The National Eating Disorders Information Centre (NEDIC) in Toronto, Canada, has actually put a figure on it, suggesting that our weight is about 81 per cent genetically determined.

If Australians are heavier than they used to be, then it may well be that many of us are actually sitting above our set point. It follows, then, that if we could all learn to eat "normally" again, that is, eat in response to hunger rather than because of boredom, depression or just that we're feeling a little emotional, we'd lose weight.

We all know someone who's been on a diet, and most likely been on one or two ourselves. But of all the people you know who have ever tried to lose weight, how many of them have actually succeeded, and kept it off?

It's been estimated that Australian women spend a staggering \$400 million a year trying to shed kilos, with up to 50 per cent of us being on some sort of diet on any given day. The bad news is that the vast majority of these diets don't work. In fact, according to the Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria (EDFV), 95 per cent of people who diet regain all the weight they've lost plus more within two years.

So, why doesn't dieting work? A number of reasons have been put forward: "fad"

