Can the Inability to Taste Food Lead to Obesity?

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Overall, studies associate increased sugar intake with weight gain. Now, new findings published in the journal Appetite suggest that there may also be a link between obesity and a person's reduced ability to savor food, reports Cornell Chronicle.

For the study, researchers at Cornell University assessed 51 healthy participants given tea to drink with low, medium and high doses of Gymnema sylvestre, an herb known for temporarily impairing an individual's ability to taste sweetness. Next, scientists allowed participants to add their preferred amounts of sweetening to bland meals.

Findings showed that participants added 8 to 12 percent more sugar to their foods. What's more, those with blocked sugar receptors were more likely to prefer higher concentrations of sugar. Scientists also found that compared with those with unaltered taste buds, individuals with a 20 percent reduction in the ability to detect sweetness craved an extra teaspoon of sugar for a regular sugary 16-ounce soft drink to taste sweet enough.

"Others have suggested that the overweight may have a reduction in their perceived intensity of taste," said Robin Dando, MS, PhD, an assistant professor of food science at Cornell and the study's lead author. "So if an overweight or obese person has a diminished sense of taste, our research shows that they may begin to seek out more intense stimuli to attain a satisfactory level of reward."

According to Dando, the gustatory system that's responsible for our perception of taste and flavor may be crucial to understanding how obesity develops. In addition, he advised that conditions involving dysfunction in this taste system should be factored into research as well.

Click here to read how artificial sweeteners can lead to weight gain.