Why we eat (too much)

by Dr andrew jenkinson · Language: EN

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Overview

Dr. Andrew Jenkinson's "Why We Eat (Too Much)" challenges the conventional wisdom that obesity is simply a matter of willpower and calorie balance. Instead, Jenkinson, a bariatric surgeon, argues that our bodies have a 'set point' for weight, which is primarily regulated by hormones, particularly insulin and leptin. He posits that the modern diet, rich in refined carbohydrates and processed foods, disrupts this hormonal balance, leading to insulin resistance and an elevated set point, making sustained weight loss incredibly difficult through traditional 'eat less, move more' approaches.

The book delves into the science behind this set point theory, explaining how our bodies actively defend their fat stores and resist attempts to lose weight if the underlying hormonal signals are not addressed. Jenkinson draws on his extensive clinical experience, scientific research, and evolutionary biology to illustrate why diets often fail and why certain foods are particularly problematic. He provides a new framework for understanding obesity, shifting the focus from individual failure to a biological malfunction driven by environmental and dietary factors. The book ultimately offers practical, evidence-based strategies to reset the body's set point, emphasizing whole foods, reduced carbohydrate intake, and lifestyle adjustments to achieve lasting metabolic health and weight control.

Key Takeaways

- Understand that your body has a 'set point' for weight, which is largely controlled by hormones, not just willpower or calorie counting.
- Recognize that refined carbohydrates and sugars are primary drivers of insulin resistance and an elevated weight set point.
- Prioritize whole, unprocessed foods, focusing on protein, healthy fats, and non-starchy vegetables to improve hormonal balance.
- Consider intermittent fasting or time-restricted eating as a tool to reduce insulin levels and help reset your set point.
- Be skeptical of the 'calories in, calories out' model as the sole explanation for weight gain; hormonal regulation plays a more significant role.
- Address lifestyle factors like sleep, stress, and physical activity, as they also influence hormonal health and weight management.

• Focus on metabolic health and reducing insulin resistance rather than just chasing a number on the scale for sustainable weight loss.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Modern Epidemic

Introduces the global obesity and type 2 diabetes crisis, highlighting the failure of conventional "eat less, move more" advice. Dr. Jenkinson argues that despite increased awareness and efforts, these conditions continue to rise, suggesting a fundamental misunderstanding of their underlying causes. He sets the stage for challenging the prevailing calorie-centric view of weight gain, proposing that a deeper, physiological mechanism is at play. The chapter emphasizes the frustration and despair felt by individuals who follow dietary guidelines but fail to lose weight or keep it off, pointing towards a need for a new paradigm.

Chapter 2: The Calorie Conundrum

This chapter directly confronts the "calories in, calories out" model, arguing that while thermodynamically true, it oversimplifies the complex biological processes of weight regulation. Dr. Jenkinson explains that the body is not a simple calculator; it actively regulates energy expenditure and storage based on hormonal signals. He discusses how restricting calories often leads to a metabolic slowdown, increased hunger, and eventual weight regain, making sustained weight loss difficult. The chapter introduces the idea that what we eat is more important than how much in terms of its impact on our metabolism and fat storage.

Chapter 3: The Hormonal Hypothesis

Introduces the central premise of the book: that obesity is primarily a hormonal disorder, not simply a matter of willpower or gluttony. Dr. Jenkinson identifies insulin as the master hormone regulating fat storage and release. He explains how insulin signals the body to store excess energy as fat and prevents its release, making it difficult to access stored fat for fuel. The chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how chronic elevation of insulin levels drives weight gain and makes weight loss challenging, shifting the focus from calorie counting to hormonal balance.

Chapter 4: Insulin Resistance: The Root Cause

Delves into the concept of insulin resistance, explaining how cells become less responsive to insulin over time, requiring the pancreas to produce even more insulin to maintain blood sugar levels. Dr. Jenkinson describes this vicious cycle, where high insulin leads to insulin resistance, which in turn leads to even higher insulin. He details the widespread health consequences beyond weight gain, including type 2 diabetes, fatty liver disease, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease. The chapter emphasizes that insulin resistance is a key driver of many modern chronic illnesses, not just obesity.

Chapter 5: The Liver's Role

Explores the critical role of the liver in metabolic health and insulin resistance. Dr. Jenkinson explains how the liver processes carbohydrates and fats, and how excessive intake of sugars, particularly fructose, can lead to non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD). He describes how a fatty liver becomes insulin resistant, contributing to elevated blood glucose and further increasing insulin production. The chapter highlights the liver's dual role in both storing and producing glucose, and how its dysfunction exacerbates the metabolic problems associated with insulin resistance, making it harder for the body to burn fat.

Chapter 6: The Brain's Influence

Discusses how insulin resistance impacts the brain, particularly in regulating appetite and satiety. Dr. Jenkinson explains how chronic high insulin can lead to leptin resistance, where the brain no longer accurately receives signals of fullness from fat cells, leading to persistent hunger and cravings. He also touches on the reward pathways in the brain, and how highly palatable, processed foods can hijack these systems, driving overconsumption. The chapter illustrates how hormonal imbalances can undermine willpower, making it incredibly difficult to resist eating, even when physically full.

Chapter 7: The Food Environment

Examines how the modern food landscape contributes to the obesity epidemic by promoting insulin resistance. Dr. Jenkinson critiques the proliferation of ultra-processed foods, which are typically high in refined carbohydrates, sugars, and unhealthy fats, and designed to be hyper-palatable. He discusses how these foods, often marketed as convenient or healthy, disrupt natural satiety signals and drive overconsumption. The chapter highlights the societal and economic factors that encourage the consumption of these insulin-spiking foods, making it challenging for individuals to make healthier choices.

Chapter 8: Sugar: The Sweet Poison

Focuses specifically on the detrimental effects of sugar, particularly fructose, on metabolic health. Dr. Jenkinson explains how sugar, especially in liquid form, bypasses normal satiety mechanisms and is rapidly absorbed, leading to significant insulin spikes. He details how fructose is primarily metabolized by the liver, contributing directly to fatty liver disease and insulin resistance. The chapter distinguishes between naturally occurring sugars in whole foods and added sugars in processed items, emphasizing the latter as a major driver of metabolic dysfunction and chronic disease.

Chapter 9: Refined Carbohydrates: The Hidden Danger

Expands on the impact of refined carbohydrates, such as white bread, pasta, rice, and cereals, on insulin levels and weight gain. Dr. Jenkinson explains that these foods are rapidly digested into glucose, causing sharp rises in blood sugar and subsequent insulin surges. He contrasts these

with whole, unprocessed carbohydrates, which contain fiber and are digested more slowly. The chapter argues that the widespread consumption of refined carbs, often promoted as healthy staples, is a significant contributor to the insulin resistance epidemic, even when consumed in moderate portions.

Chapter 10: Fats: Friend or Foe?

Challenges the long-standing dietary advice to reduce fat intake, particularly saturated fat. Dr. Jenkinson argues that dietary fat, especially healthy fats, does not significantly raise insulin levels and can be a satiating and energy-dense fuel source. He differentiates between various types of fats, advocating for whole-food sources of saturated and and monounsaturated fats, while cautioning against industrial seed oils high in omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acids. The chapter aims to dispel the myth that dietary fat is the primary cause of obesity and heart disease, redirecting blame towards carbohydrates and insulin.

Chapter 11: Protein: The Satiating Macronutrient

Discusses the crucial role of protein in satiety, muscle maintenance, and overall metabolic health. Dr. Jenkinson explains that protein has a moderate impact on insulin compared to carbohydrates and is highly satiating, helping to reduce overall calorie intake naturally. He emphasizes the importance of adequate protein intake for preserving lean muscle mass during weight loss and supporting a healthy metabolism. The chapter encourages incorporating sufficient protein from quality sources into the diet as a key strategy for managing hunger and promoting fat loss.

Chapter 12: Reversing Insulin Resistance

Shifts from diagnosis to solution, outlining the core principles for reversing insulin resistance. Dr. Jenkinson emphasizes reducing the intake of foods that spike insulin, primarily refined carbohydrates and sugars. He introduces the concept of a low-carbohydrate, whole-foods diet as the primary intervention. The chapter explains how consistently keeping insulin levels low allows the body to become more sensitive to insulin again, enabling it to access and burn stored fat for energy, thereby breaking the cycle of weight gain and metabolic dysfunction.

Chapter 13: The Power of Fasting

Introduces intermittent fasting as a powerful tool to complement dietary changes in reversing insulin resistance. Dr. Jenkinson explains how periods of not eating allow insulin levels to drop significantly and remain low, promoting fat burning and cellular repair processes like autophagy. He discusses various fasting protocols, such as time-restricted eating (e.g., 16/8) and longer fasts, and their physiological benefits. The chapter provides practical guidance on how to safely incorporate fasting into one's lifestyle, emphasizing its role in accelerating metabolic healing and weight loss.

Chapter 14: What to Eat (Practical Guidelines)

Provides practical, actionable dietary recommendations based on the book's scientific principles. Dr. Jenkinson outlines specific food groups to prioritize (e.g., non-starchy vegetables, healthy fats, quality proteins) and those to minimize or avoid (e.g., sugar, refined grains, processed foods). He offers guidance on meal planning, grocery shopping, and making sustainable food choices. The chapter aims to translate the complex science into an easy-to-follow eating plan designed to lower insulin, reverse insulin resistance, and promote long-term health and weight management.

Chapter 15: Beyond the Plate (Lifestyle Factors)

Acknowledges that while diet is paramount, other lifestyle factors also play a significant role in metabolic health. Dr. Jenkinson discusses the importance of adequate sleep, stress management, and regular physical activity. He explains how poor sleep and chronic stress can elevate cortisol, which in turn can increase blood sugar and insulin levels, hindering weight loss efforts. The chapter emphasizes that exercise, while not a primary driver of weight loss, is crucial for improving insulin sensitivity, building muscle, and overall well-being, advocating for a holistic approach to health.

Chapter 16: Sustaining Success

Focuses on the long-term maintenance of metabolic health and weight loss. Dr. Jenkinson discusses strategies for navigating social situations, managing cravings, and adapting the dietary approach over time. He emphasizes the importance of consistency, patience, and understanding that metabolic healing is a journey, not a quick fix. The chapter provides advice on monitoring progress, troubleshooting plateaus, and developing a sustainable lifestyle that supports low insulin levels and prevents the recurrence of insulin resistance, promoting lasting health and vitality.

Themes

- Hormonal regulation
- Set point theory
- Insulin resistance
- Metabolic health
- Processed food impact
- Sustainable weight loss

Notable Quotes

- "The problem is not that we are eating too much because we are greedy, but that we are eating too much because our body's set point has been pushed higher." — Explaining the core premise that obesity is a biological issue, not a moral failing or lack of willpower.

• "Insulin is the most powerful fat-storage hormone in the body. If you want to lose weight, you must lower your insulin levels." — Highlighting the central role of insulin in fat metabolism and the primary target for effective weight loss strategies.

• "The 'calories in, calories out' model is an accounting system, not a biological one. It fails to explain why different foods have different effects on our bodies." — Critiquing the simplistic energy balance model and advocating for a more nuanced, hormonally-driven understanding of weight.

• "Your body has a 'set point' for fatness, a weight it will defend vigorously. To lose weight sustainably, you must lower this set point." — Introducing and emphasizing the crucial concept of the set point and the necessity of resetting it for lasting results.

• "The modern diet, rich in refined carbohydrates and sugars, is the primary driver of insulin resistance and an elevated set point." — Identifying the main culprits in the current food environment that contribute to the obesity epidemic.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Why we eat (too much) about?

The book argues that obesity is primarily a hormonal issue, not a simple calorie imbalance. It introduces the 'set point' theory, explaining how our bodies defend a certain weight, and how modern diets, especially refined carbohydrates, elevate this set point by disrupting hormones like insulin. It offers strategies to reset this set point for sustainable weight loss.

Is Why we eat (too much) worth reading?

Yes, for anyone struggling with weight loss or interested in the science of obesity. Dr. Jenkinson provides a compelling, evidence-based alternative to conventional dieting advice, offering a deeper understanding of the body's weight regulation. It's particularly valuable for those who have found 'eat less, move more' ineffective.

How does Why we eat (too much) end?

Spoiler: The book concludes by emphasizing that sustainable weight loss and metabolic health require a long-term commitment to dietary and lifestyle changes that lower the body's set point. It reinforces the importance of consistency, patience, and understanding the biological mechanisms at play, rather than viewing it as a temporary diet or a test of willpower.

Who should read Why we eat (too much)?

This book is ideal for individuals who have tried numerous diets without lasting success, those interested in the scientific basis of weight gain beyond calories, and healthcare professionals looking for a new perspective on obesity. It's for anyone seeking a comprehensive understanding of why modern diets make us gain weight and how to reverse it.

How long does it take to read Why we eat (too much)?

On average, it takes approximately 6 to 7 hours to read "Why we eat (too much)" at a typical reading speed of 250 words per minute.

Questions & Answers

What is the central argument of "Why We Eat (Too Much)"?

Dr. Jenkinson argues that obesity is primarily a hormonal and biological problem, not simply a lack of willpower or overeating due to gluttony. He posits that our bodies have a "weight set point," regulated by hormones like insulin and leptin, which can be raised by modern diets, particularly ultra-processed foods. The book contends that conventional advice like "eat less, move more" fails because it doesn't address the underlying biological mechanisms that drive increased hunger and reduced metabolism, making it incredibly difficult for individuals to sustain weight loss against their body's set point.

What is the "weight set point" theory explained in the book?

The "weight set point" theory suggests that the body has a genetically and biologically determined weight range it strives to maintain. This set point is regulated by the brain, particularly the hypothalamus, in response to hormonal signals from fat cells and the gut. When you try to eat below your set point, your body increases hunger, reduces metabolism, and conserves energy to return to that set weight. Dr. Jenkinson argues that modern diets, especially ultra-processed foods, can "reset" this set point higher, making it harder to lose weight and keep it off.

How does Dr. Jenkinson explain the role of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) in weight gain?

Dr. Jenkinson highlights UPFs as a primary driver of the elevated weight set point. These foods are engineered to be hyper-palatable, often high in sugar, refined carbohydrates, and unhealthy fats, while being low in fiber and nutrients. They disrupt satiety signals, promote insulin resistance, and interfere with the body's natural hormonal regulation of appetite and metabolism. This leads to increased hunger, cravings, and fat storage, effectively "hijacking" the body's natural weight control mechanisms and pushing the set point higher, making overconsumption almost inevitable.

Why does the author argue that "eat less, move more" is often ineffective?

Dr. Jenkinson contends that "eat less, move more" is an oversimplified and often ineffective approach because it fails to account for the body's powerful biological and hormonal regulation of weight. When someone tries to restrict calories below their elevated weight set point, the body responds by increasing hunger, slowing metabolism, and conserving energy. This makes sustained calorie restriction incredibly difficult and often leads to rebound weight gain. The author argues that addressing the underlying hormonal dysregulation, rather than just calorie

counting, is crucial for lasting weight management.

What is the significance of hormones like insulin and leptin in the book's theory?

Insulin and leptin are central to Dr. Jenkinson's theory. Insulin, released in response to carbohydrate intake, signals fat cells to store energy. Chronically high insulin levels, often due to diets rich in refined carbs and sugar, lead to insulin resistance, where cells become less responsive, requiring even more insulin. Leptin, a hormone from fat cells, signals satiety to the brain. However, with excessive fat, the brain can become leptin resistant, failing to register satiety signals, leading to persistent hunger despite ample energy stores. These resistances are key drivers of an elevated weight set point.

What practical advice does Dr. Jenkinson offer for managing weight?

Dr. Jenkinson's practical advice focuses on lowering the body's weight set point by addressing hormonal regulation. Key recommendations include drastically reducing or eliminating ultra-processed foods, refined carbohydrates, and added sugars. He advocates for a diet rich in whole, unprocessed foods, including plenty of protein, healthy fats, and fiber from vegetables. While not strictly advocating for a specific named diet, the principles align with low-carb, whole-food approaches. He also emphasizes the importance of managing stress, ensuring adequate sleep, and incorporating regular physical activity, though not solely for calorie burning.

How does the book challenge conventional wisdom about obesity?

The book fundamentally challenges the conventional wisdom that obesity is a moral failing or simply a result of sloth and gluttony. It refutes the idea that all calories are equal and that weight loss is purely a matter of willpower and balancing "calories in, calories out." Instead, Dr. Jenkinson presents obesity as a complex biological disease driven by hormonal dysregulation and an elevated weight set point, largely influenced by modern dietary patterns. This perspective shifts the blame from the individual to the environment and the food system.

What role does the hypothalamus play in weight regulation, according to the author?

The hypothalamus, a region in the brain, plays a crucial role in regulating the body's weight set point. It acts as the central control panel, receiving hormonal signals from the gut and fat cells (like leptin and insulin) and then orchestrating responses that influence hunger, satiety, and metabolism. Dr. Jenkinson explains that when the hypothalamus becomes resistant to these signals, particularly due to chronic exposure to inflammatory foods and high insulin, it can "reset" the weight set point higher, leading the body to defend a heavier weight.

Does the book advocate for a specific diet?

While Dr. Jenkinson doesn't strictly advocate for one named diet (e.g., keto, paleo), his recommendations strongly align with a whole-food, low-carbohydrate approach. He emphasizes eliminating ultra-processed foods, refined sugars, and excessive refined carbohydrates. Instead, he promotes a diet rich in protein, healthy fats, and fiber from non-starchy vegetables. The focus

is on food quality and its impact on hormonal regulation, rather than strict calorie counting or adherence to a branded dietary plan.

What is insulin resistance, and why is it important in the context of the book?

Insulin resistance is a condition where the body's cells become less responsive to insulin, requiring the pancreas to produce more and more of the hormone to manage blood sugar. Dr. Jenkinson highlights insulin resistance as a core mechanism driving weight gain and an elevated set point. Chronically high insulin levels promote fat storage, particularly around the abdomen, and can lead to leptin resistance, further disrupting satiety signals. Addressing insulin resistance through dietary changes is a key strategy proposed in the book for lowering the weight set point.

How does the book address the idea of willpower in weight loss?

Dr. Jenkinson argues that relying solely on willpower for weight loss is often futile and unfair. He explains that when the body's weight set point is elevated, biological drives for hunger and energy conservation become incredibly powerful, overriding conscious willpower. It's not a lack of moral fortitude, but a biological imperative. The book shifts the focus from blaming individuals for their lack of willpower to understanding and correcting the underlying hormonal and metabolic dysfunctions that make sustained weight loss so challenging.

What are the long-term implications of following the book's advice?

The long-term implications of following Dr. Jenkinson's advice are aimed at achieving sustainable weight management and improved metabolic health. By lowering the body's weight set point through dietary changes that reduce insulin resistance and restore hormonal balance, individuals can experience reduced hunger, increased satiety, and a more efficient metabolism. This approach aims to make weight loss and maintenance feel more natural and less like a constant battle against one's own body, leading to better overall health outcomes beyond just scale numbers.

What does Dr. Jenkinson suggest about the food industry's role in the obesity epidemic?

Dr. Jenkinson strongly implicates the food industry in the obesity epidemic, particularly through the widespread production and marketing of ultra-processed foods (UPFs). He argues that these foods are deliberately engineered to be addictive and hyper-palatable, driving overconsumption and disrupting natural satiety mechanisms. The industry's focus on profit over public health, combined with misleading marketing, contributes significantly to the dietary environment that elevates people's weight set points and makes healthy eating challenging.

How does the book differentiate between hunger and appetite?

The book implicitly differentiates between true physiological hunger, which is a biological need for nutrients, and appetite, which can be driven by external cues, cravings, or hormonal dysregulation. Dr. Jenkinson explains that an elevated weight set point and hormonal imbalances, particularly leptin resistance, can lead to a constant, inappropriate sense of hunger

or strong cravings (appetite) even when the body has ample energy stores. The goal of his approach is to restore the body's ability to accurately signal true hunger and satiety.

What is the main takeaway for someone struggling with chronic weight gain?

The main takeaway is that chronic weight gain and difficulty losing weight are likely not due to a personal failing or lack of willpower, but rather a biological problem of an elevated weight set point. The book offers hope by explaining that by understanding and addressing the hormonal and metabolic drivers, primarily through eliminating ultra-processed foods and focusing on whole, unprocessed foods, individuals can reset their body's set point and achieve sustainable weight management without constant struggle.

Does the book discuss the impact of stress or sleep on weight?

Yes, Dr. Jenkinson acknowledges the significant impact of stress and sleep on weight regulation. He explains that chronic stress can elevate cortisol levels, which in turn can increase insulin resistance and promote fat storage, particularly visceral fat. Poor sleep also disrupts hormones that regulate appetite (ghrelin and leptin) and can impair insulin sensitivity, making weight management more challenging. While diet is central, he includes stress management and adequate sleep as important supportive factors for lowering the weight set point.

What does the title "Why We Eat (Too Much)" truly signify?

The title "Why We Eat (Too Much)" signifies that the book delves beyond the superficial act of overeating to explore the underlying biological and environmental reasons. The parenthetical "Too Much" implies that the problem isn't necessarily a conscious choice to eat excessively, but rather that our bodies are being driven to eat more than they need due to hormonal dysregulation and an elevated weight set point. It's an inquiry into the causes of overconsumption, rather than just stating the symptom.

How does the book explain why some people can eat a lot and not gain weight, while others struggle?

The book explains this disparity through the concept of the weight set point and individual metabolic health. People who can eat a lot without gaining weight likely have a lower, healthy weight set point and robust metabolic flexibility, meaning their bodies efficiently process and utilize food without significant hormonal disruption. Others, whose set point has been elevated by genetics, environment, or diet (especially UPFs), experience hormonal resistance, leading their bodies to store more fat and drive increased hunger, even on fewer calories.

What is the author's view on bariatric surgery?

Dr. Jenkinson discusses bariatric surgery, acknowledging its effectiveness for significant weight loss. However, he explains that its success isn't simply due to mechanical restriction. He argues that bariatric surgery works primarily by altering gut hormone signals, which in turn helps to lower the body's weight set point. While it can be a powerful tool, he emphasizes that

understanding the hormonal mechanisms behind its success reinforces his broader argument about the biological regulation of weight, rather than just calorie restriction.

How does the book address the idea of being "fat but metabolically healthy"?

Dr. Jenkinson discusses that while obesity is often associated with poor health, the crucial factor is metabolic health, not just weight on the scale. He explains that some individuals may carry more weight but remain metabolically healthy, while others who appear thin can be metabolically unhealthy ("TOFI" - Thin Outside, Fat Inside). The book emphasizes that the goal isn't just weight loss, but improving metabolic markers like insulin sensitivity, blood sugar, and inflammation, which are more indicative of true health than BMI alone. This highlights the importance of internal biology over external appearance.