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You're eating too much! Diet computer that tells you harsh truth at mealtimes

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IT SOUNDS like something from the Orwellian world of Big Brother – a machine that tells you how much to eat and how fast to eat it. Yet a device which does just that is helping obese children to control their eating and lose weight.

A study, published today in the British Medical Journal (BMJ), found that the Mandometer – a set of scales connected to a small computer – was effective in reducing the amount youngsters ate.

They now hope the technique could be rolled out to othe
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r groups of overweight children and adults to help tackle the UK's weight problems.

The Mandometer was developed by researchers in Sweden and has also been used by clinics in the United States and Australia to treat eating disorders.

For the latest study, researchers at the Bristol Royal Hospital for Children and the University of Bristol recruited 106 obese patients aged nine to 17. One group were given the Mandometer to help them lose weight, while the others were given standard advice and treatment.

Using the Mandometer, youngsters were assessed and given a weight for the food they should be eating at each meal.

An empty plate is then placed on the Mandometer scales and filled to the set level.

Information is sent to the small computer which creates a graph showing how much is being eaten and at what speed. If children eat too fast or too slowly, it tells them to slow down or speed up. The computer also asks them to rate how full they feel during the course of the meal.

The idea is for patients to eat at a pace where their stomach tells their brain when they are full and are not eating too fast so this message does not have time to arrive.

Professor Julian Hamilton-Shield, who led the research, said the results were very promising.

The patients were assessed after 12 months and followed up at 18 months, and Prof Hamilton-Shield said the group using the Mandometer saw an average reduction of 2.1 points in their body mass index (BMI) – a measure of weight in relation to height.

They also saw an 11 per cent reduction in their speed of eating, compared to a 4 per cent gain in the other group, while portion size also dropped by 14 per cent compared to a 6 per cent drop in the control group.

Prof Hamilton-Shield said one adolescent in the study lost 27.8kg in weight.

The researchers said that the Mandometer seemed to be "a useful addition to the rather sparse options available for treating adolescent obesity effectively" without resorting to drug treatment.

Prof Hamilton-Shield said they hoped the treatment – which has also been used to help people with anorexia – could be made more widely available in the UK.

"This is still in a trial and we want to do more work on it," he said, "but I do think that the basic premise that if you eat slower you eat less food is probably a good message for anyone."

Colin Waine, of the National Obesity Forum, said the use of the device was worth exploring further as other methods to reduce obesity had not worked well.

Dr Waine said: "We must be willing to innovate."

How it works

• Empty plate is placed on a set of scales, connected to a small computer.

• The user puts food on the plate up to the weight agreed with their assessor.

• They then start eating. Information on the amount of food removed from the plate is sent to computer, which creates a graph showing the rate of eating.

• If they eat too fast or too slowly, the device tells them to slow down or speed up.

• The user rates how full they feel on a scale of one to 100, measured against a curve showing how full they should feel as they eat the meal.

Page 1 of 1

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