New research suggests that people who are exposed to healthy ‘primes’, such as healthy images and words, are more able resist unhealthy snacks later in the day.

The research, titled *Time of day effects on the regulation of food consumption after activation of health goals*, was published in *Appetite*, an influential nutrition and dietetics journal. The paper is based on the results of two studies conducted by Professor Paul Connell, of Cass Business School, part of City University London.

Professor Connell worked on the studies with marketing experts Professor Wendy Boland, Kogod School of Business, part of American University and Dr Beth Vallen, of the Fordham School of Business.

During the first study, participants were shown adverts for healthy food, unhealthy food and non-food products. In the second study, participants completed word puzzles containing trigger words for healthy, indulgent or non-food items. Sweets were made available for consumption throughout both exercises. The exercises were staged either in the morning or in the afternoon.

In the afternoon timeslots, participants who viewed adverts for unhealthy food ate on average 51.6 grams of sweets. Participants who viewed non-food adverts ate 51.3 grams of sweets, while participants who viewed adverts for healthy food products ate just 20.7 grams of sweets.

Participants also consumed fewer sweets after exposure to the healthy trigger words (an average of only 31.2 grams) than after exposure to the non-food (41.1) or indulgent (48.2) trigger words.

The studies clearly indicate that exposure to healthy images and words subconsciously activate health goals. These ‘primes’ work by boosting self-regulation levels, which are typically higher in the morning after sleep, but fade as they are tested throughout the day.

The results of the research potentially have a wider significance, informing those who play a vital role in improving public health; food marketers, the media and the government.

Professor Connell said: “The timings of healthy advertisements and public service messages can be optimised in order to help people adhere to healthier lifestyles by boosting their levels of self-regulation over the course of the day.”

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