

UCL/Weight Concern Press Release

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NEW RESEARCH OFFERS HOPE FOR PARENTS OF PICKY EATERS

An intervention developed by UCL psychologists significantly increases consumption of fruit and vegetables commonly disliked among picky young children, new research has found.

The research, published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, showed that in a randomised controlled trial involving 450 young children, a new method of taste exposure significantly increased the proportion of children willing to try new foods and to continue eating them.

In the trial of the method with over 200 families, toddlers showed a 61% increase in their liking of a specific vegetable, and the amount of the vegetable they were willing to eat trebled. A new pack called Tiny Tastes - based on this method - has been developed by UCL in partnership with Weight Concern, a charitable organisation set up by a group of academics and clinicians to combat the epidemic of obesity sweeping the UK by supporting and empowering people to live a healthy lifestyle.

Mealtimes can frequently be a battle-ground for many parents, with up to 40 per cent of toddlers becoming picky eaters at some point during childhood, with more than a quarter refusing food every day. In addition, despite the importance of fruit and vegetables in a healthy diet, only 20 per cent of children actually eat the recommended five portions a day, according to the 2010 Health Survey for England.

Vegetables are among children's most disliked foods, and vegetable intake consistently falls short of dietary guidelines. Food patterns established in early childhood have been shown to track into adulthood, with the charity urging that increasing children's vegetable intake should be a priority for public health. Patterns of food refusal commonly begin around the age of two. The rejection of foods such as vegetables is widespread and a significant cause of anxiety to parents, with problematic eating patterns a common reason for consulting health professionals.

The Tiny Tastes packs were developed for parents by UCL psychologists and Weight Concern to help overcome these challenges by making the introduction of new vegetables into a fun game that both children and parents can enjoy. Tiny Tastes packs include straightforward instructions for parents together with record charts, colouring sheets for kids and fun stickers.

The science behind Tiny Tastes builds on research that shows that after tasting a new vegetable at least ten times, children like it more and will eat more of it. The authors found that offering a reward encourages even the pickiest eaters to get involved. Over two weeks the simple process of Tiny Tastes actually increases children's liking for vegetables, making them more willing to try other vegetables.

Commenting on the findings, Dr Lucy Cooke, Senior Research Psychologist at the Health Behaviour Research Centre at UCL and author of the research, said:

"It's thought by evolutionary psychologists that when humans were cave-dwellers that picky eating would have stopped young, newly mobile children from eating unfamiliar plants or berries which

might be poisonous. Knowing this is not much consolation, though, when your child refuses to eat anything green and is living on plain pasta and orange juice!”

“Our research shows clearly that a programme of introducing children to unfamiliar foods regularly and over a sustained period will lead to greater familiarity and eventually enjoyment of these foods – so for the best results, it is worth persisting using this structured approach.”

Dr Laura McGowan, Director of Weight Concern, added:

“The advantage of Tiny Tastes is that it provides everything parents need to help overcome what can quickly become a nightmare at mealtimes and a stressful experience for the whole family.

“Parents can also be secure in the knowledge that the pack is based on solid scientific research which shows the positive effects it can have on the eating habits of young children – both immediately and for a lifetime.”

Tiny Tastes packs are now available at £5.99 (+ £2.00 p&p) from the charity Weight Concern www.weightconcern.org.uk/tinytastes

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For media enquiries please contact the UCL press office on 0207 679 9041, including requests to interview Dr Lucy Cooke and for details of case studies available for interview.

Notes to Editors

Tiny Tastes was developed by Weight Concern and UCL with support from UCL Business, UCL’s technology transfer and licensing company.

About UCL (University College London)

Founded in 1826, UCL was the first English university established after Oxford and Cambridge, the first to admit students regardless of race, class, religion or gender and the first to provide systematic teaching of law, architecture and medicine.

We are among the world's top universities, as reflected by our performance in a range of international rankings and tables. According to the Thomson Scientific Citation Index, UCL is the second most highly cited European university and the 15th most highly cited in the world.

UCL has nearly 27,000 students from 150 countries and more than 9,000 employees, of whom one third are from outside the UK. The university is based in Bloomsbury in the heart of London, but also has two international campuses – UCL Australia and UCL Qatar. Our annual income is more than £800 million.

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About the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre

The Health Behaviour Research Centre undertakes research aimed at advancing our understanding of behaviours that have a major impact on health and to contribute to the development of interventions to promote healthy lifestyles. The Centre is part of the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, UCL.

It receives core funding from Cancer Research UK and is staffed mainly by health and clinical psychologists. Additional funding is received from the Medical Research Council, the Biotechnology

and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Department of Health, and the British Heart Foundation. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hbrc/>

About Weight Concern

Weight Concern is a registered charity established in 1997 by a group of researchers and clinicians who recognised the need for an organisation addressing the needs of people who are overweight, and tackling the growing problem of obesity in the United Kingdom. Founded by Jane Wardle, Professor of Clinical Psychology at University College London, Weight Concern wants to support and empower people to live a healthy lifestyle, and improve the understanding of health professionals and the public about the causes, consequences and treatments of overweight and obesity. It is dedicated to providing clear evidence-based information on obesity and weight management, and providing a 'voice' for those who have first-hand experience of weight problems.

Weight Concern is committed to helping people improve their health and sense of well-being by increasing access to successful treatments such as their 'Shape-Up' programme, researching and developing new approaches to combating obesity, and helping to find ways to prevent weight gain. Weight Concern won the Best New Charity of the Year Award in 2002 and is funded entirely through its activities in research, fundraising, training and education provision. Weight Concern is also a certified member of the Information Standard which means all of the health and social care information it produces is deemed trustworthy and evidence-based. www.weightconcern.org.uk