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Sweeteners may actually make us crave more food

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DRINKS with artificial sweeteners increase food cravings and appetite in women and obese people, a study suggests.

It means slimmers who use low-calorie alternatives to sugar may actually put on weight rather than lose it.

US researchers examined the effects of sweeteners on 74 men and women who were obese, overweight or a healthy weight.

For three days, participants were given a 300ml drink – one that was just water, one sweetened with table sugar and one sweetened with sucralose.

Sucralose is up to 1,000 times sweeter than normal sugar and is found in Splenda, which has just two calories per teaspoon.

Within two hours of finishing each drink, participants gave blood samples and had an MRI scan while being shown pictures of burgers, sweets and doughnuts.

They were then offered unlimited access to a buffet.

Women and obese people had more activity in the brain regions responsible for cravings and appetite after eating sucralose than real sugar.

After the sucralose drink, all groups had a decrease in hormones that tell the body 'I feel full'. This suggests that artificial sweeteners may not be effective in suppressing hunger. And women ate more at the buffet after the sucralose drink – but food intake did not differ for men, according to findings published in the journal JAMA Network Open. About 7 million Britons aged 15 and over consume artificial sweeteners. However, the health consequences are highly debated, with no clear consensus on their effects on appetite, glucose metabolism and body weight.

Study author Dr Kathleen Page, of the University of Southern California, said: 'There is controversy surrounding the use of artificial sweeteners because a lot of people are using them for weight loss.

'While some studies suggest they may be helpful, others show they may be contributing to weight gain, type 2 diabetes and other metabolic disorders.'

Naveed Sattar, professor of metabolic medicine at the University of Glasgow, warned that the study findings could simply be down to chance.

He said: 'I would still be very happy for all people to substitute high-calorie drinks for low-calorie ones – including water – as a means to help lessen calorie intake.'