

set point theory

What is Set Point?

Height is mostly determined by genetic factors. No-one seems to dispute the fact you cannot successfully change your height - some people are just shorter than average, others are taller, and that's just the way we are. The same principal applies to weight.



Genetics play a large part in determining the weight at which our bodies tend towards, and this depends on bone structure, metabolism, musculature, and much more.

It is thought that the human body has a weight range that it is genetically predisposed to maintain. This natural weight range is called your “set-point”, and is different for every person – and can be different for people of the same height.

The human body uses regulatory mechanisms to keep its weight within this natural weight range. For example, if you eat more than you need to maintain your body weight, then typically your body temperature will rise and your metabolism speeds up to burn the extra calories. If on the other hand you do not eat enough to maintain your weight, then your basal metabolism slows down to spare the available calories. Another regulatory mechanism is hunger - if the body is not getting enough energy, you will feel more hungry.

For example, a woman may have a genetically pre-determined set-point of 65-70kgs. If she eats a fairly balanced diet, she will tend to remain at this weight for much of her adulthood, unless something interferes, e.g., pregnancy, illness, menopause, etc. If her weight falls below this weight range (below 65kgs), her body will fight to regain the lost weight by increasing hunger levels and slowing metabolism.



What Does This Mean For You?

Set-point is an important concept to understand if you are restricting your food intake. When you start to restrict the amount of food you eat and fall below your body's natural weight range, your body will increase your level of hunger, increase your number of thoughts about food, and decrease your metabolism. These mechanisms are in place to try and get your body back to its natural weight range.

Trying to keep your body below its natural weight range results in an ever-increasing battle with these mechanisms. Preoccupation with food becomes so overwhelming that it can be hard to



concentrate on anything else. Due to increased levels of hunger and increased thoughts about food, constant restricting of food intake makes you vulnerable to episodes of binge eating. This means that trying to control your body through restricting food intake can actually lead to a loss of control and weight gain.

Eating a well balanced diet and exercising moderately will help you keep your body in its natural weight range, and keep you in control.

If you are suffering from food preoccupation due to restricted food intake, there is one lesson you must learn from set-point theory:

To recover from your preoccupation with food, weight and hunger, your body must be returned to a weight that is near its natural weight range. No amount of psychological treatment will remove your food obsessions unless weight is regained to a healthy level for your body.