AP Psychology
1999 Sample Student Responses

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Both biological and learning mechanisms play a major role in determining an individual's eating habits and body weight. An individual's body's brain chemistry creates a predisposition to a certain level of body fat. Glucose levels in the body also signal an individual that energy consumption is necessary. Individuals with diabetes, who have hyperinsulin levels, are much more careful in maintaining healthy eating habits and a consistent body weight. Imbalances in brain chemistry and lesions in the brain (namely the hypothalamus) can result in abnormal eating behaviors, including obesity, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa. Since the hypothalamus is the hunger center of the brain, it influences how and how often an individual eats. Any damage to this crucial structure usually results in unhealthy eating habits. Genetics also play an important role in determining eating habits and body weight. The Paleolithic Perscription is a theory that explains why humans are predisposed to eat sugars and fats (because sugars are easily processed into energy; fats are readily stored). Back in the Paleolithic age, sugars and fats were scarce, now they are abundant. Modern humans still have the same general genetic make-up as Paleolithic man and still tend to eat as much sugar and fat as possible. This is one reason why obesity is so prevalent now-a-days. Obesity is also hereditary. Heredity is important in determining eating habits and body weight. Set point (the body's preferred fat to other ratio, i.e. body fat percentage) are usually genetically determined and usually passed from parent to offspring. Other diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc., that tend to be hereditary dramatically affect eating habits. People with heart disease, for example, will (hopefully) consume less saturated and fat than healthy individuals in order to reduce their risk of heart failure.
Learning mechanisms also affect an individual's eating habits and body weight. Certain foods taste better than others. This positive reinforcement will incline individuals to choose certain better tasting foods over other not-so-good tasting foods, even if the not-so-good tasting foods are healthier. Also, children are usually taught what foods are appropriate at what times. Scolding a child for eating between meals, snacks, and punishing the consumption of candy will result in regular, 3-meal-a-day eating habits and a moderate-to-low empty calorie consumption. Children will also tend to eat what role models eat. What parents, friends, and TV commercials model will be what an individual will tend to eat. Modeling ties in with cultural factors. American society, for example, promotes the consumption of fatty foods and the maintenance of low body weight. This paradoxical, oxymoronic belief system results in many unhealthy eating patterns and illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia.

By knowing one's genetic make-up and genetic history, an individual can weigh manage accordingly. Individuals with a family history of obesity should consume little-to-no fats and minimal sugars while increasing fruits and vegetable intake. Individuals with high-metabolism rates can eat more fats and sugars with less concern, but should try to eat more proteins than anything else. When planning a diet or working on weight management, one must realize that culture works against them. An individual should establish weight goals that maximize efficiency, health, and happiness, not what TV feels is
attractive. Heroin cheat should not be a weight management goal.
An individual's eating habits and body weight are determined both by biological and learning mechanisms. It is a sort of interaction between nature and nurture. Biologically, an individual's body chemistry affects eating habits depending on its composition. For example, let's say there's two people that each weigh 120 lbs. One is an athlete, and another is a businessman. The percentage of fatty tissue compared to total body weight would probably be much higher in the businessman. Therefore his body's metabolism would be much lower. If both subjects ate the same amount of food, the businessman would gain more weight than the athlete. This is because fatty tissue does not burn calories but muscle does. In this way, body chemistry affects body weight and eventually eating habits as well. If the businessman chose to remain at the same body weight he would have to reduce his calorie intake (i.e., eat less).

Brain structure and genetics also affect a person's body weight and eating habits. Eating is controlled by the hypothalamus so an abnormality in the structure of the hypothalamus could lead to an eating disorder.
Either under-eating and overeating body and brain structure/chemistry is passed on from parents on to their children. This is why obesity often runs in families.

However, your genes don't determine your weight and eating habits on their own. Cultural factors influence a person's diet. For example, many people in America eat at fast-food restaurants because it is convenient. However, fast-food is not so readily available in Ethiopia. In this way, a person's culture can influence his or her body weight. Modeling can influence a person's eating habits as well. The children of a vegetarian are more likely to be vegetarians themselves than children of non-vegetarian parents.

Eating something like chocolate can sometimes make people feel good when they are depressed. By reinforcement, people will tend to eat this substance again and again whenever they are feeling sad.

Two ways of controlling your body weight are exercise and changing behavior patterns through reinforcement. By exercising you can change your body chemistry. The percentage of body fat can be reduced and metabolism can be.
raised. This means that more food can be eaten without gaining weight. Another way to manage your body weight is by avoiding situations where you know you eat a lot — parties, social gatherings, etc. Later, you can reward your behavior by watching a movie you've wanted to see for a long time or by going to the beach when you've lost ten pounds.
There are several factors that affect the eating habits and weight management in all people. Both learned and biological mechanisms are the categories in which a person’s diet is regulated. The biological mechanisms are extremely important as a person grows and develops mentally and physically. Body and brain chemistry are the controlling factors. The brain sends messages to the body when food is wanted and hunger must be suppressed. Some people develop hunger quicker and easier than others.

The structure of one’s brain can cause hunger to occur more frequently even though it is not the body that is not. Genetics also play a deciding factor for eating and weight management. Some people are born into a family with obesity as a main problem. Others are genetically situated with fast metabolism. These factors are considered biological because a person has little or no control over them.

Need is the second category that determines an individual’s eating and weight management. As a child, a person may be forced in an environment where snacks and unhealthy foods are constantly available. Parental supervision may not be enforced. The constant diet of healthy food is important in the development of a person.
The reinforcement for a healthy diet starts with parents and their style of diet. Children learn from what their parents enforce as a healthy diet. Another core factor is modeling type of learning. Cultural factors is extremely important because it sets guidelines for people. In many cultures around the world vegetarianism or strict diets are enforced. Some cultures have only one main source of food due to economic conditions.

Because biological and learning mechanisms play important role controlling factors not all people can consciously take full control over their diets. In weight management many people suffer from eating disorders. These can trigger which further result in either obesity or starvation. A person's body and brain could convince them that they are too fat or that nothing in life matters as a result of depression. Controlling one's body weight is usually an endless struggle because of ideas and pressures that are set. A person may learn that by not eating they will lose weight and fit the guidelines set by today's society. Reinforcement of negative comments can may force a person to develop mentally as a "thin fat" person.
Because people chose a certain thing to control body weight is a popular choice. Although it is difficult people with body weight problem have the power to change.