

# Is your workplace a fat trap?

The daily grind might pay the bills and put food on the table but it can also put kilos where you don't want them. Joshua Jennings investigates why working 9-5 is making us fat

**B**elinda Carroll sets her alarm early enough to make lunch to take to work but, when the clock radio starts barking, the temptation to hit the snooze button, pull up the covers and buy lunch usually proves too much.

'When I do take my lunch I generally prepare healthy food but I'm usually pretty

tired in the mornings so it's too much hassle. At night there's too much TV on and I'm worn out from the day.'

Belinda bought a chicken and salad sandwich and a bottle of water for lunch today but says it's a constant struggle to be disciplined.

She estimates that she opts for junk food at work once or twice a week.

Can you have your cake and eat half of it?



'I'm sure the junk food that I eat at work, combined with the fact that I have a desk job that provides no exercise, has made me gain weight in the last few years,' she says.

## ■ JUNK FOOD EVERYWHERE

Concerns about the link between junk food and obesity has seen junk food crackdowns in school canteens but it's another matter to wage the same wars in adult workplaces. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that more than half of Australian adults are either overweight or obese – a troubling situation given that obesity increases our risk of developing heart disease, sleep apnoea, type 2 diabetes and a range of other health problems. Obesity also costs the economy \$21 billion annually.

So how do we dodge junk food at work? Belinda wishes she had the answer. 'There's a pub next door so it's easy to go for a drink or a meal and there's always "parma and pint" offers on,' she says. 'The whole team will go and, even though I don't drink beer, I'll go anyway. It's not as cheap as a sandwich but it shows you're a team member.'

Aloysa Hourigan, a senior nutritionist at Nutrition Australia, says there's nothing wrong with a pub lunch provided you don't view it as an excuse to eat badly.

'Look for somewhere that offers choices that you know are better for you,' she says.

*'Workplace stress is a massive issue – and it has serious implications for what workers eat'*

'At the end of the day, you are the person that can control portion size and how much you actually eat.'

She adds: 'Ask for an entrée-size meal or, if you've eaten a big meal during the day, compensate by having a small evening meal.'

Shift workers also need to make conscientious diet decisions. 'Some don't feel like eating before they start a shift. They skip meals and come home very hungry,' Aloysa says. 'Shift workers should still eat every four hours, no matter what time they wake or go to bed. If they keep that pattern going, it will stop them overeating.'

## ■ STRESSED?

Dealing with workplace stress can be a major challenge – and it has serious dietary implications.

'When people get anxious and stressed, they seek comfort – and for a lot of people it's food,' says Bridget Thompson, director of New Leaf Nutrition ([www.newleafnutrition.com.au](http://www.newleafnutrition.com.au)).

Alcohol is a commonly used stress-busting crutch. A recent survey of school principals found one in four has turned to alcohol to cope with the pressures of the job. But there are plenty of ways to break the habit.

'When you come home from work, put on your runners and go around the

block a few times to clear your head,' Bridget suggests. 'For other people, it's a matter of getting out your wine glass and filling it up with mineral water or soda so you still feel like you're having that drink. For some, the relaxing effect is the feeling of having the glass in your hand.'

## ■ MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES EASIER

Poor office kitchen facilities, happy-hour splurges, fatty

canteen menus and vending machines also contribute to the workplace junk food culture. At Boral, ANZ and Commonwealth Bank, health problems are minimised because employees are offered health checks, education and motivation.

'It's about behaviour management and helping people to develop the skills to self-manage,' says John Lang, managing director of Good Health Solutions, which runs health programs for these corporate giants. 'When you're emotionally well-balanced and life's not hammering you too severely, you'll often make good choices. People's decisions become less healthy the more stressed and time-poor they feel.' **S&H**

## Lose weight at work

With the variety of foods available in the throng of cafés, fast-food outlets and sandwich shops in your average food court, what better place to sate your lunch-break hunger? But how do you do so without hurting your waistline?

- 1 'Make any bread-based purchases wholegrain all the time,' says Bridget.
- 2 '50% of your lunch and dinner should incorporate salad,' she says. 'If you can manage that ratio, you're on your way to a good choice.'
- 3 'Look out for condiments,' Bridget warns. 'Things like butter, mayonnaise and sauces can be a killer.'
- 4 'Portion sizes make a big difference,' says Aloysa. 'Go for the smaller sizes.'
- 5 'Avoid the food courts when you're ravenous,' Bridget advises. 'In survival mode you're more inclined to bite into the first thing you can get your hands on.'