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Changing food tastes

Think back to your childhood and the type of food you loved eating. Does it give you the shivers? I remember eating whole bars of chocolate at one sitting and desserts so sweet I had to drink about a gallon of water afterwards. Fruit and vegetables were a no-no and most meals involved meat of some sort – quite a difference to my vegetarian present self. Food preferences change as we age and in this article we're going to explore the reasons for this.

As a baby, eating and comfort are strongly linked (and not just as a baby) and our brains start connecting the flavour of breast milk to satisfaction. This is apparently the reason that vanilla ice-cream is the world's number one best selling flavour, as the taste of our mother's milk is essentially vanilla (and I just thought it was because vanilla is a flavour that goes with everything). Babies have many more taste buds in their mouths than adults and they are tuned to the type of food a baby needs – food that's high in fat and sugar – as we need more calories in relation to body weight as an infant than at any other time in life. For this reason, young children aren't interested in salty or sour flavours and bitter flavours are rejected as potential poisons, which could explain why it's difficult to get children to eat their greens.

As they get older, children lose their sweet tooth and will often start eating and drinking certain foodstuffs they hate the taste of, like wine or coffee, because they make them seem more adult. At first we pretend to like them, but over time our brains start telling us we enjoy the sensation and they become part of our diet. But at the same time young people nowadays are being brought up more and more on sugary processed foods and they are often turning to sugary products in adolescence, hence the popularity of alcopops – sweet premixed alcoholic drinks.

As we get older our taste buds become less sensitive, perhaps because we smoke or have often scalded our tongue and it becomes harder for us to accept new tastes. We get stuck in our ways and when we reach old age, our appetites are much smaller than before as our stomachs shrink in size and our brains tell us we're full much more quickly. We also produce much less saliva than before which could be a reason we don't enjoy eating so much. Looking back made me shudder and looking forward doesn't seem much brighter if all I have to look forward to is soggy, bland meals, so I'd better make the most of the present. Pass me another cup cake, please.