

Anne-Marie gorges on fast food, doesn't exercise yet stays slim. So scientists studied every tiny detail of her life to find out why. Could her case help you?

by **Jenny Johnston**

**A**NNE-MARIE Martin is one of those women we love to hate — someone who tells you, while stuffing down a McDonald's meal, that she can eat what she likes without putting on weight.

Her eating habits are, even she admits, downright shameful. She tells me that she has been known to visit McDonald's three or four times in one week, albeit only, she says, 'If it's a very busy week when I'm rushing around with no time to cook'.

This is a woman who not only has a passion for pasties, but goes out of her way to make them even more unhealthy. She routinely prises up the top so she can fill up the air space inside with lashings of calorie-rich salad cream. 'Delicious,' she says.

She's also a woman who thinks nothing of having cheese for breakfast, cheese for lunch and more cheese for dinner. 'I like cheese, but even I had no idea how much of it I ate,' she says. Even her work colleagues at her dance company in Woolwich, south-east London, where Anne-Marie, 42, runs children's dance and party classes, seem peeved when they discuss her diet. 'She eats rubbish,' says colleague Jan. 'Lucky cow.'

Why is she lucky? Well, despite a diet that seems to break all the rules, Anne-Marie weighs just over 9st and is an enviable size 8, even after having given birth to two children.

So is her lithe frame the result of a hugely active lifestyle? Does she run marathons when not eating pasties? Another friend, Laura, laughs.

Anne-Marie, it seems, doesn't walk anywhere. 'She would take a taxi to the toilet if she could,' she says.

So what is her secret? And once we discover it, can we all emulate it, please?

A Channel 4 documentary has determined to do just that by finding out how women like Anne-Marie stay slim. For five days, Anne-Marie, who lives in east London, was followed, firstly by cameras that she knew were there, then by hidden ones that filmed her covertly.

Her friends and family were quizzed about her eating habits. Dietitians and health experts analysed every move she made, and every morsel that passed her lips.

No part of her life was left unexamined. She was filmed asleep, so that her sleep patterns — **which are linked to weight fluctuations** — were assessed. Stool samples were sent off to a laboratory so her gut bacteria — another thing that can affect weight — could be tested.

She admits she agreed to the unusual intrusion because she is fascinated about why she has stayed so slim when most of her friends struggle with their weight.



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'The general feeling was that I ate loads more than them,' she says. 'I've always been able to eat what I like and still not change shape, while they are all going to Weight Watchers and struggling. Do I just have a really fast metabolism? Was it something in my DNA? Was it my background?'

'Although I'm not hugely active now, I did train as a dancer, so is my figure a throwback to those days? I wanted to have an answer.'

Anne-Marie isn't the only guinea pig for this fascinating TV experiment. IT worker Yemi Williams, 37, also takes part. It's fair to say Yemi, also a father of two young children, is a man with a healthy appetite.

His childhood nickname was Dustbin, on account of his ability to pack away not just his own food but other people's, too.

At work, colleagues also marvel at how much he can eat. A whole packet of biscuits for dessert after lunch is not unusual. Yet he still wears the 32in waist trousers he always has, and weighs a healthy 12st

'It's always been a mystery to me,' he says. 'When I was younger I did a lot of sport, so that seemed to be the answer. But I haven't done any sport for years, and you'd expect that I'd just pile on the weight. It hasn't happened. I wanted to know why — if only so that when my colleagues ask, "How do you do it?", I would have an answer.'

So what do we discover from the meticulous tracking of these two super-eaters?

Their typical breakfasts on day one leave experts — including a dietitian and sleep and exercise specialists — baffled. The expression on face of dietitian Amanda Ursell is a sight to behold. Suffice to say, neither starts the day with an egg white omelette and a sliver of avocado.

Anne-Marie has her beloved toast with lashings of cheese — and a generous dollop of HP Sauce on top. Yemi tucks into a huge bowl of sugar-laden Crunchy Nut Cornflakes, which he follows up with a second bowl.

**T**HEY keep eating at lunchtime. Yemi has a restrained salad roll he has brought with him — but then

dashes to the shop to buy a full litre bottle of fruit juice and a packet of biscuits, and polishes off the lot.

After work, Anne-Marie takes her daughter to a ballet class — then, as is her Monday tradition, heads for the McDonald's drive-thru. Ursell almost cheers though, when she emerges having bought meals for her kids — but not, this time, for herself. Instead she goes home and polishes off a home-made chicken curry.

Yemi? His wife Afua, a trained chef, is cooking tonight and it is another mountain — this time of stir-fried noodles.

If day one is anything to go by, it's a mystery as to how these two remain so slim.

The first test is to see if they do have 'magic metabolisms'. They troop off to see Professor John Brewer at St

Mary's University and have their resting metabolic rate tested.

The news is surprising. Both have entirely normal metabolisms, neither low or particularly high. Yemi, he estimates, needs to consume around 2,400 calories a day; Anne-Marie just slightly less, 2,300.

So how to explain their svelte frames? As the experiment continues, some fascinating data and conclusions emerge.

After two days, it is noted that neither Anne-Marie or Yemi snack throughout the day. Yes, they may seem to eat enough food for four people at mealtimes, but they do not stuff themselves with crisps and chocolate in the car, or on the sofa of an evening.

'It's just not a habit I ever got into,' says Anne-Marie. Even her beloved pasty is eaten at the table, with a knife and fork.

Is there something to be concluded, too, from the fact that Anne-Marie doesn't tend to eat late at night either? She and her husband Harry eat with their children, Bobby, nine and Lily, five.

'I gobble up my food then,' she says. 'It's always been a standing joke about how much I eat, and how fast. But it is all contained within mealtimes. I'd never sit at night and think, "Ooh chocolate". Actually I don't have a sweet tooth. I don't like

cake. It was my birthday the other day and I didn't even have a slice.'

**Y**EMI, too, might seem to still deserve his childhood moniker of Dustbin, but he, too, veers towards the savoury, and doesn't snack.

'I eat to feel full. My goal is to get enough inside me that I'm not hungry for four or five hours, then I tend not to eat between that time.'

What becomes increasingly obvious is that neither could be described as emotional eaters.

'I'd never run to open a box of chocolates, or hit the crisps after a bad day,' says Anne-Marie. Yemi is baffled even by the question.

Also, interestingly — and this is seized on by the experts with gusto — neither drinks much alcohol. Yemi doesn't drink any. Anne-Marie might have the odd glass of an evening, but says she can 'go for weeks and weeks without having any'.

Is this significant? Yes, according to the experts who say that excessive wine consumption not only adds copious calories (an average glass of wine contains as many as a slice of cake), but alcohol in your system also affects how fats and sugars are digested.

The pair do have one blow-out meal during the experiment, laid on by the TV company, which wants to see how they behave when they are told they can eat whatever they want. Anne-Marie has pizza and chips. Yemi goes for a buffet meal, and returns to top up his plate a whopping three times.

But does this blow-out meal — on top of a normal calorie intake that already seems excessive — result in any noticeable weight gain?

Most intriguingly, no. Amanda Ursell is stunned to discover that neither consumes enough calories during the week to warrant any expected weight gain.

'What's interesting is that when they had a blow-out, both tended to eat a bit less the next day, not in a planned way but in an unconscious way. This is significant.'

'The point about these two is that they seem to overeat, but actually their diet is more balanced than you'd think. They have an in-built

calorie control system, one they aren't even aware of themselves.'

The experts then move on to assessing how active they are. To hear them, and their friends, talk, you would think they were couch potatoes. Anne-Marie admits that even when parking the car she will 'spend ten minutes looking for a space close to where I need to go, so that I don't have to walk'.

Jogging? She laughs uproariously.

'Never. I can't even imagine running. It's just not me, and I don't go to the gym either.'

In her dancing days she was obviously very active, but since setting up her business ten years ago, she has become more desk-bound.

'I used to take maybe 15 to 20 kids' classes a week, but now I'm lucky if I do four,' she says.

That's it, then, the sum total of her exercise. And yet when her physical movements are assessed, they stun everyone. It turns out

that Anne-Marie doesn't necessarily need to go to the gym. She expends more energy than most from her office chair.

She's stunned to watch the footage of her at work; she simply never sits still. She is constantly moving,

flailing her arms about, jumping up to make a point. 'I'm a terrible fidgeter and I never knew that,' she laughs. 'They reckon I use up a lot of energy just being me.'

What about Yemi? While he used to play a wide range of sports including football and basketball, he now only walks to and from the tube — a half-mile walk each way.

And yet, look at the speed at which he walks. It is phenomenal. The camera crew assigned to tracking him point out that they can't keep up. Is this the secret of his slimness? It's certainly a factor.

There are others, too. Both volunteers are asked to wear sleep tracking devices, and are monitored as they sleep. Both turn out to be good sleepers.

Anne-Marie, in particular, routinely gets a good nine hours' sleep, and the monitoring process shows that some 40pc of this is a really deep sleep.

'Interestingly, a lot of my friends who have issues with their weight say they have problems sleeping. I get to bed by 11pm most nights and I sleep like a baby.'

Is sleep really a factor when it comes to weight issues? Very much so, says Professor Francesco Cappuccio from the University of Warwick.

'We have shown very clearly in population studies that chronic poor sleepers — those sleeping less than six hours a night on a regular basis — tend to develop a variety of conditions. They become overweight.'

Why? The key seems to be in the balance between the hormones ghrelin and leptin, which work in a see-saw action to regulate the body.

When the action between the two is disrupted — disordered sleep can cause this — it can play havoc with the rest of the body.

There are some tantalising discoveries in this programme. When the results from their gut bacteria analysis come back from the lab, both are found to have quite high levels of 'good' bacteria.

Anne-Marie has twice the average amount of an anti-inflammatory bacteria called *akkermansia*, which is causing great interest in research circles because it has been linked to improved metabolic health.

Is this the magic secret to her slimness? 'No one has any idea,' she says. 'But it's definitely something my friends are interested in. I think people want to feel that there is a "reason" out there.'

Perhaps the greatest lesson — and it will be a sobering one for those on an obsessive yo-yo diet cycle — is that neither of these two is hung-up on food. Neither spends hours planning meals, or wondering what to eat next.

'I love my food,' says Anne-Marie. 'But maybe there is something in the fact that all my decisions about food are unconscious. I eat what I feel like eating and I don't get too hung up on it.'

GP Dr Julie Coffey says that the pair have discovered, quite by

chance, something that many of us struggle with: self-regulation.

'These guys have got learned behaviour when it comes to food and exercise. Their behaviour is serving them well.'

The secret to staying slim, then? Frustratingly for those who think there may be an easy solution, the answer seems to be mindset.

'We have a lot to learn from these two, not least that they seem to approach food without any guilt at all,' says Amanda Ursell. 'There is no magic bullet.'

■ THE Truth About Slim People, Wednesday, November 8, 9pm, Channel 4



Svelte:  
Anne-  
Marie  
Martin  
Picture:  
JOHN NGUYEN