

Healthy food makes consumers feel hungrier when choices are limited

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If we don't have a choice in the matter, eating something that's considered healthy might simply lead us to feel hungry and eat something else, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Stacey Finkelstein and Ayelet Fishbach (both University of Chicago) examined external controls in the domain of healthy eating—such as marketers who only offer shoppers [healthy food](#) samples or consumers who eat healthy meals in a cafeteria that only offers healthy alternatives.

"In the presence of external controls, people who eat healthily feel that they have made sufficient progress on their health goals," the authors write. "Then, they switch to the conflicting goal to satisfy their appetite: they express hunger and seek food."

In one experiment, the authors told people their job was to taste a food that was described as healthy or tasty (imposed conditions) or had people choose between the same food samples (free-choice conditions). Then participants rated their hunger.

"People who were given a food sample described as healthy rated they were hungrier than those who were given the same sample framed as tasty and delicious," the authors write. "Those who freely chose the food sample were equally hungry. Thus, only those who were given the healthy food sample (imposed consumption) became hungrier."

In another study, participants were given a sample of the same piece of bread that was described as healthy (low-fat with lots of vitamins) or tasty (delicious with a thick crust and soft center). They also asked people how much they valued watching their weight. "People given the bread described as healthy were hungrier, thus they consumed more of an available snack, than those given the same piece described as tasty," the authors write. But the effect disappeared for those who valued watching their weight; they chose to eat the healthy bread.

In addition to providing guidance to marketers, the study has policy implications. "When controlling agents take actions to help consumers meet their long-term objectives, people need to infer that they have made the choice to do so themselves. Otherwise, these efforts will backfire," the authors conclude.

More information: Stacey Finkelstein and Ayelet Fishbach. "When Healthy Food Makes You Hungry." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2010. (Published online March 10, 2010).

Provided by University of Chicago

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