

Health halos that make us fat

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If you think you eat healthier at the Sunburst Fresh Cafe than at Big Jims Beefy BBQ, you might be wrong. You could be a victim of the "Health Halo."

This study, presented today at the Association for Consumer Research conference in Jacksonville, FL, showed that people eating at [restaurants](#) claiming to be "healthy" estimated they ate only 56% as many calories as they actually did. The problem was these people tended to reward themselves by eating more chips, fries, and cookies, according to authors Pierre Chandon of INSEAD and Brian Wansink of Cornell University.

In one experiment, people were given the same [food](#) but told it was from McDonalds or they were told it was from Subway. Even when eating the exact same food, people estimated the sandwich in the Subway wrapper contained 21% fewer calories than the one in the McDonald's wrapper. The problem, said Chandon, was "People can [eat](#) more at these "healthy" restaurants, but they think they ate less, so they then opt for a dessert."

There's a solution to the danger of this [Health Food](#) halo, said Wansink. "If you're eating at what you think is a healthy restaurant, take your best estimate of the calories in the meal – and double it. You'll be a lot more accurate." Another approach is to think twice as to whether the "Health" positioning of the restaurant is relevant for everything they serve.

These findings, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, were awarded the 2010 Best Paper Award at the Association for Consumer Research Conference in Jacksonville, FL on Saturday, October 9.

Provided by Cornell University

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