

Dieters duped by food names according to study

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What's in a name? Plenty, according to a University of South Carolina study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* that found that dieters eager to make good food choices are more at risk of being misled by food names than non-dieters

Dr. Caglar Irmak, an assistant professor of marketing at the Darla Moore School of Business, found dieters rate food items with healthy names such as “salad” as being healthier than identical food items with less healthy names such as “pasta.” Non-dieters made no such distinction.

He conducted the study with co-authors Beth Vallen of Loyola University and Stefanie Rose Robinson, a doctoral student in marketing at the Moore School.

“The fact that people’s perceptions of healthfulness vary with the name of the food item isn’t surprising,” Irmak said. “What is interesting is that dieters, who try to eat healthy and care about what they eat, fell into these ‘naming traps’ more than non-dieters who really don’t care about healthy eating.”

When study participants were given a choice between the same candy labeled “fruit chew” and “candy chew,” not only did dieters perceive the candy named fruit chew as more healthful than the one named candy chew, but they ate more candies when the items were called fruit chews (versus [candy](#) chews).

Why are dieters who want to eat well so easily duped by these labels?

Dieters avoid forbidden foods based on product names, Irmak said. As they hone in on food names – salad versus pasta – they give less consideration to product information.

On the flip side, Irmak said, non-dieters tend to miss cues that imply healthfulness, including names, because of their lack of focus on healthy eating.

A salad in a restaurant may include items that dieters typically would avoid, such as meat, cheese, bread or pasta. Other examples Irmak gives are milkshakes listed as “smoothies,” potato chips called “veggie chips” and sugary drinks labeled “favored water.”

He says dieters should focus on reading nutritional information on food products and menus and not food names.

“These results should give dieters pause. The study shows that [dieters](#) base their food decisions on the name of the [food](#) item instead of the ingredients of the item,” Irmak said. “As a result, they may eat more than what their dieting goals prescribe.”

More information: The article, titled “The Impact of Product Name on Dieters’ and Non-Dieters’ Food Evaluations and Consumption” will be published in the August issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* (www.ejcr.org)

Provided by University of South Carolina

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