

Mindless eating: Losing weight without thinking

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Dieters may not need as much willpower as they think, if they make simple changes in their surroundings that can result in eating healthier without a second thought, said a consumer psychologist at the American Psychological Association's 119th Annual Convention.

"Our homes are filled with hidden eating traps," said Brian Wansink, PhD, who presented his findings and strategies for a healthier lifestyle in a plenary address entitled "Modifying the [Food Environment](#): From [Mindless Eating](#) to Mindlessly Eating Better."

"Most of us have too much chaos going on in our lives to consciously focus on every bite we [eat](#), and then ask ourselves if we're full. The secret is to change your environment so it works for you rather than against you," Wansink said

Wansink identified several myths about eating behaviors as a way to explain why Americans, on average, have been getting fatter. "People don't think that something as simple as the size of a bowl would influence how much an informed person eats," he said.

However, several studies show exactly that, including Wansink's study of 168 moviegoers, who ate either fresh or stale popcorn from different size containers. People ate 45 percent more fresh popcorn from extra-large containers than large ones and the people who were eating stale popcorn ate 34 percent more from the extra-large buckets than people eating fresh popcorn, according to the study.

They just don't realize they're doing it," said Wansink. This strategy also applies to what we drink. His research found that people pour about 37 percent more liquid in short, wide glasses than in tall, skinny ones of the same volume.

Even a kid's cereal bowl can be a trap, according to Wansink. One study showed children of different [weights](#) who were given a 16 ounce bowl were more likely to serve themselves twice as much cereal than children given an 8 ounce bowl.

Another myth, according to Wansink, is that people know when they are full and stop before they overeat. His Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University tested this by designing a "bottomless bowl." They brought in 60 people for a free lunch and gave 22 ounce bowls of soup to half, while the other half unknowingly got 22 ounce bowls that were pressure-fed under the table and slowly refilled. The results: people with bottomless bowls ate 73 percent more than those with normal bowls, yet when asked, they didn't realize they had eaten more. "The lesson is, don't rely on your stomach to tell you when you're full. It can lie," Wansink said.

Simply being aware of such findings can help people make healthier choices, especially those who are already trying to eat healthier foods, according to Wansink. One of his studies showed that people lost up to two pounds a month after making several simple changes in their environment, including:

- eating off salad plates instead of large dinner plates.
- keeping unhealthy foods out of immediate line of sight and moving healthier foods to eye-level in the cupboard and refrigerator.
- eating in the kitchen or dining room, not in front of the television.

"These simple strategies are far more likely to succeed than [willpower](#) alone. It's easier to change your environment than to change your mind," Wansink concluded.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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