

# Eating healthy or feeling empty?

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# THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE OF EATING

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We've collected the newest thinking from 30 consumer behavior researchers into the inaugural issue of the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research.

## I. HUNGER AND SATIETY



**SKIP DINNER IF YOU'RE NOT HUNGRY:** Spikes in your blood sugar can lead to weight gain.<sup>1</sup>



**DON'T CALL IT HEALTHY:** You overeat food called "healthy" because you think it's less filling.<sup>2</sup>



**MAKE LESS - WASTE LESS:** Low-income families prepare too much food in fear of "running out."<sup>3</sup>



**MIRRORS = MINDFULNESS:** Kitchen mirrors make you dislike unhealthy food.<sup>4</sup>

## II. SHOPPING AND DINING



**HAPPY MEALS CAN BE HEALTHY MEALS:** Brain scans show that small prizes keep you happy when eating less food.<sup>5</sup>



**DISNEY HELPS DIETS:** When juice and fruit came with meals, Disney World goers consumed 11-24% more of them.<sup>6</sup>



**READ CAREFULLY:** Per-serving calorie labels can lead to mindless overeating.<sup>7</sup>



**SLICE SMALLER:** Smaller portions (and bigger tables) lead to smaller meals.<sup>8</sup>



**FOOD PANTRY SOLUTIONS:** Behavioral economics in food pantries lead to healthier shopping.<sup>9</sup>

## III. MINDLESSLY EATING BETTER



**USE SMALL PLATES:** You serve 20-25% less when using small plates - but only if a researcher is not watching!<sup>10</sup>



**THE LESS FANCY THE PLATE,** the Less You'll Eat. We may eat the least off paper plates.<sup>11</sup>



**FORKS OVER SPOONS:** Forks (versus spoons) make you overestimate calories.<sup>12</sup>



**AVOID NEGATIVE MESSAGES:** Telling dieters "Don't eat cookies" can double how much they eat. Use 2-sided messages instead.<sup>13</sup>

## IV. THE FUTURE OF FOOD RESEARCH

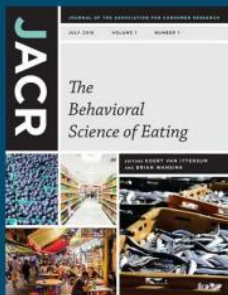
FROM FRINGE TO FOCUS:

The Behavioral Science of Eating: Encouraging Boundary Research that has Impact<sup>14</sup>

Boundary Research: Tools and Rules to Impact Emerging Fields<sup>15</sup>



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[FOODPSYCHOLOGY.CORNELL.EDU/JACR](http://FOODPSYCHOLOGY.CORNELL.EDU/JACR)



- <sup>1</sup> Gal, JACR 2016
- <sup>2</sup> Suher, Raghunathan & Hoyer, JACR 2016
- <sup>3</sup> Porpino, JACR 2016
- <sup>4</sup> Jami, JACR 2016
- <sup>5</sup> Reimann, MacInnis & Bechara, JACR 2016
- <sup>6</sup> Peters, Beck, Lande, Pan, Cardel, Ayoob & Hill, JACR 2016
- <sup>7</sup> Elshiewy, Jahn & Boztug, JACR 2016
- <sup>8</sup> Davis, Payne & Bui, JACR 2016
- <sup>9</sup> Wilson, JACR 2016
- <sup>10</sup> Holden, Zlatevska & Dubelaar, JACR 2016
- <sup>11</sup> Williamson, Block & Keller, JACR 2016
- <sup>12</sup> Szocs & Biswas, JACR 2016
- <sup>13</sup> Pham, Mandel & Morales, JACR 2016
- <sup>14</sup> Van Ittersum & Wansink, JACR 2016
- <sup>15</sup> Wansink & van Ittersum, JCB 2016

The Behavioral Science of Eating Infographic is in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*. Credit: Brian Wansink

Eating too much is typically considered one of the prime culprits of obesity. A new study published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, looked specifically at overconsumption of "healthy" foods which consumers often perceive as less filling. The researchers successfully found evidence to support their hypothesis that when people eat what they consider to be healthy food, they eat more than the recommended serving size because they associate "healthy" with less filling.

The research utilizes a multi-method approach to investigate the "healthy = less filling" intuition. The first study was conducted with 50 undergraduate students at a large public university and employed the well-established Implicit Association Test to provide evidence for an inverse relationship between the concepts of healthy and filling. The second study was a field study conducted with 40 graduate students at a large public university and measured participants' hunger levels after consuming a cookie that is either portrayed as healthy or unhealthy to test the effect of health portrayals on experienced hunger levels. The third study was conducted with 72 [undergraduate students](#) in a realistic scenario to measure the impact of health portrayals on the amount of [food](#) ordered before watching a short film and the actual amount of food consumed during the film. The set of three studies converges on the idea that consumers hold an implicit belief that healthy foods are less filling than [unhealthy foods](#).

Specifically, the researchers demonstrate that portraying a food as

healthy as opposed to unhealthy using a front-of-package nutritional scale impacts consumer judgment and behavior. When a food is portrayed as healthy, as opposed to unhealthy, consumers report lower hunger levels after consumption, order greater portion sizes of the food, and consume greater amounts of the food. Surprisingly, even consumers who say they disagree with the idea that healthy foods are less filling than unhealthy foods are subject to the same biases. In addition, the researchers introduce a novel tactic for reversing consumers' habit of overeating foods portrayed as healthy: highlighting the nourishing aspects of healthy food mitigates the belief that it is less filling.

These findings add to the burgeoning body of work on the psychological causes of weight-gain and obesity and point to a way of overturning the pernicious effects of the "healthy = less filling" assumption. Specifically, the findings suggest that the recent proliferation of [healthy food](#) labels may be ironically contributing to the obesity epidemic rather than reducing it. Consumers can use this knowledge to avoid overeating foods presented as healthy and to seek foods portrayed as nourishing when they want to feel full without overeating.

This article is published in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* entitled "The Behavioral Science of Eating."

**More information:** Suher, Jacob, Raj Raghunathan and Wayne Hoyer (2016). Eating Healthy or Feeling Empty? How the "Healthy = Less Filling" Intuition Influences Satiety. *The Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 1.

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