

# How food-related warnings backfire among dieters

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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>



LEARN MORE AND WATCH THE VIDEOS  
[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

Credit: Brian Wansink

We have all seen messages from the "food police" telling us that sugary snacks are bad. But is it possible that seeing these messages actually make us more likely to eat sugary snacks? Researchers at Arizona State University, Nguyen Pham, Naomi Mandel, and Andrea Morales, show, in new research published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, that these messages backfire among dieters. They find that dieters ate 39% more cookies after seeing a "food police" style message that says, "All sugary snacks are bad" than those who saw a positive message."

The researchers conducted three studies to demonstrate that negative one-sided [messages](#) about food can lead to backfire effects. In the first study, 380 participants read a positive, negative, or neutral message about dessert. Dieters who saw the negative message had more positive thoughts about unhealthy foods, but non-dieters did not show any difference. Moreover, thoughts about healthy foods or non-food words were unaffected by the messages. "What these results show us," Pham explains, "is that rather than leading dieters to make healthier choices, these food police messages are actually making unhealthy foods even more enticing to dieters."

In the second study, 397 participants read a one-sided positive or negative about [sugary snacks](#) and then watched a short video while eating chocolate-chip cookies. Dieters who saw the negative message consumed 39% more cookies than dieters who saw the positive message. As in the first study, non-dieters were unaffected by the messages about food.

The third study focused on snack choice and examined how reactions to two-sided messages, which contain both positive and negative information about food, might reduce the backfire effects. Among 324 participants, dieters who saw the negative message chose 30% more unhealthy snacks than dieters who saw the positive message, while dieters who saw the two-sided message chose 47% fewer unhealthy snacks than those who saw the negative message.

In an attempt to reverse the obesity epidemic in the U.S., the government and its agencies are increasing their use of public service announcements (PSAs) to try and provide useful information to consumers about the dangers of unhealthy eating. However, this new research shows that there is a real danger in using messages that convey only negative information about food. Mandel warns, "Our work shows that negative messages about unhealthy food will backfire among [dieters](#). If you want to change what they eat, a more even-handed message that contains both positive and negative information is the way to go."

**More information:** Pham, Nguyen, Naomi Mandel and Andrea Morales (2016). Messages from the Food Police: How Food-Related Warnings Backfire among Dieters, *The Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 1.

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

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