

# **Small plates can help us lose weight when we self-serve**

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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

Credit: Brian Wansink

There are small easy steps that we can take to tackle the burgeoning problem of obesity. One of those solutions is surprisingly simple: use smaller plates.

There have been over 50 studies examining whether or not smaller plates help in reducing consumption. Despite all these studies, there is surprisingly little consensus on the effect of smaller plates. Some find that smaller plates help reduce consumption, but others do not.

New research published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* examines all these prior research projects together and finds that overall, smaller plates can help reduce consumption under specific conditions.

The researchers collated 56 previous research studies examining the effect of smaller plates on consumption. The various studies examined whether smaller plates reduce consumption for a wide variety of conditions: food type (snackfoods, popcorn, ice-cream, breakfast cereal, rice, vegetables, fruit, etc.), plate-type (bowls vs. plates, serving platter vs plate from which the food is consumed), portion-size (fixed amount of food served, amount varied in line with the plate-size, or self-served portions), setting (consumers invited to a food laboratory vs unaware consumers in natural settings such as a buffet).

Combining all the studies showed that halving the plate size led to a 30% reduction in amount of food consumed on average. In the case of plates, reducing the diameter by 30% halves the area of the plate and reduces

consumption by 30%.

The research found two important factors that amplify the effectiveness of small plates in reducing consumption. The first is that smaller plates reduce consumption best if diners are self-serving their portions. That is, if diners invited to serve themselves are provided with smaller plates, they serve themselves less, and by extension, eat less.

The second factor is that the smaller plates work best if consumers are unaware that their consumption is being monitored. That is, modifying the plate size appears to have no effect on consumption if people realize that they are being watched. This helps explain why so many studies conducted in [food](#) laboratories have not found an effect of plate-size on [consumption](#).

The findings of this research show that simply switching to smaller plates can help curb overeating among individuals in situations where they serve themselves such as at the home dinner table or at a buffet. "Just changing to smaller plates at home can help reduce how much you serve yourself and how much you eat", says joint-author Natalina Zlatevska of Bond University, Australia.

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:** Holden, Stephen S., Natalina Zlatevska, and Chris Dubelaar (2016). Whether smaller plates reduce consumption depends on who's serving and who's looking: a meta-analysis. *The Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 1.

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

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