

How depictions on cake mix boxes can lead us to overeat

March 30 2016

BIG PICTURES OF PORTIONS LEAD TO OVEREATING



Through their new research findings published in *Public Health Nutrition*, Cornell Food and Brand Lab researchers found that depictions of frosted cake on cake mix boxes can cause consumers to significantly overestimate the appropriate serving size. Credit: Daniel Miller

When estimating portion size, we may be more influenced by food images on the packaging than by the listed serving size leading us to serve more than is recommended. When additional food items are depicted on packages—such as frosting on cake-mix boxes— we are even more likely to overserve!

Through their new research findings published in *Public Health Nutrition*, Cornell Food and Brand Lab researchers found that depictions of frosted cake on cake mix boxes can cause consumers to significantly overestimate the appropriate serving size. "If we see a slice of cake smothered in frosting on the cake box, we think that is what is normal to serve and eat, but that's not what is reflected in the serving size recommendation on the nutrition label," explains lead author and researcher John Brand, PhD.

In a series of studies, Brand, Brian Wansink, PhD, director of the Food and Brand Lab and author of *Slim by Design: Mindless Eating Solutions for Everyday Life*, and Abby Cohen, a former Food and Brand Lab Intern, found that depictions of frosted cake on cake mix boxes amount to nearly 135% more calories than the recommended serving size. In a survey of 72 undergraduates and 44 females in the [food](#) service industry, they found that these overly caloric depictions caused both groups to overestimate serving size. The latter group, overestimated by 122 calories. However, when the phrase "frosting not included on the nutritional labeling," appeared on the box, estimation of an appropriate serving size was significantly reduced.

"Undoubtedly, companies don't intend to deceive us when they include frosting in cake box depictions, but these seemingly small elements of packaging can have a huge impact," says co-author Brian Wansink. In conclusion, the researchers suggest that companies simply include a phrase reminding us that extra items in package labels, like frosting on the [cake](#), are not included in the nutrition label's recommended serving

size.

More information: John Brand et al. Frosting on the cake: pictures on food packaging bias serving size, *Public Health Nutrition* (2016). [DOI: 10.1017/S1368980016000458](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980016000458)

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

Citation: How depictions on cake mix boxes can lead us to overeat (2016, March 30) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-03-depictions-cake-overeat.html>

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