

Just a few more bites: Defining moderation varies by individual, study finds

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The University of Georgia's Michelle vanDellen, an assistant professor in the department of psychology, led a study that found that the more people like a certain food, the more forgiving their definitions of moderation. Credit: Dot Paul/University of Georgia

Though eating in moderation might be considered practical advice for

healthy nutrition, a new University of Georgia study suggests the term's wide range of interpretations may make it an ineffective guide for losing or maintaining weight.

The more people like a food, the more forgiving their definitions of moderation are, said the study's lead author Michelle vanDellen, an assistant professor in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences department of psychology.

"Moderation is a relative term," she said. "When people talk about eating in moderation, it doesn't allow them a clear, concrete way to guide their behavior.

"For both thin and [overweight people](#), people tend to think of moderation through their own objective lens, and they tend to exaggerate what moderation is."

The study, published in the journal *Appetite*, describes the relative meanings attached to moderation based on perceptions. The findings are based on the results of different studies the team conducted in the lab and online.

"We asked people to tell us what they think moderation is, in terms of quantity," said vanDellen, an expert on self-control. "For instance, the research team asked participants to define how many cookies would be moderation, how many would be indulgence and how many would be considered what you should eat.

"People do think of moderation as less than overeating, so it does suggest less consumption. But they do think of it as more than what they should eat. So moderation is more forgiving of their current desires. ... The more you like a food, the more of it you think you can [eat](#) in moderation."

The study adds to the growing body of literature that suggests people are poor judges of the amounts of food they're eating. And in terms of the rising rates of obesity, vanDellen notes a general backlash against dieting.

"People are now saying, 'Diets don't work; you shouldn't go on a diet. You should just live by the rule of moderation,'" she said. "This is an increasingly popular belief. There are entire healthy eating movements oriented toward this idea of moderation."

She cites the many stigmatizing features associated with judging people for being overweight as one possible source of this reaction. These movements are very sensitive to the negative effects of those stigmas.

"But those movements assume people can actually be good judges of what they're eating and what constitutes an appropriate amount," vanDellen said. "The fact that those movements are gaining in popularity at the same time we are learning [people](#) are not good at estimating things like moderation suggests there's a lot of room to be concerned about growing rates of obesity."

More information: Michelle R. vanDellen et al, How do people define moderation?, *Appetite* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2016.03.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.03.010)

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