

## Are you a victim of 'clean plate' syndrome?

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(HealthDay)—If your belly is full from a delicious holiday feast but there's one more sweet left on the dessert tray, will you hold back or yield to temptation?

New research suggests that you'll give in, driven by a widely shared attitude towards [food](#) that prompts you to "clean the plate," even if you're not really still hungry.

It's a form of "consumption closure," nutritionists say. But over time it makes keeping the waistline trim an uphill battle.

"The concept of a clean plate has many roots," noted Connie Diekman, director of university nutrition at Washington University in St. Louis. "The starving children of the world, the lack of food during WWI or II and, of course, the fact that many people do not notice feelings of satiety and eat until the food is gone."

And while "what drives an individual to 'clean their plate' might be very individual, the concern is global," she added. "Overeating is a component of our growing problem of overweight."

That thought was seconded by Lona Sandon, program director of the department of clinical nutrition in the school of health professions at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. "These extra bites may lead to weight gain or hinder weight-loss attempts," she agreed.

"Those of us in the nutrition and dietetics business are well aware of the 'clean plate' mentality," Sandon said. "And this is something I would often talk about when working with people wanting to lose weight—getting people to accept that they do not have to eat everything on their plate, that it is OK to throw it in the trash, and that those few extra bites after you are already full have calories that can add up."

Still, new research suggests that it's really only when a little food is left on the plate that the "clean-the-plate" phenomenon kicks in; a plate still piled high with sweets appears to be far easier to resist.

In a series of four experiments, scientists led by Veronika Ilyuk of Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., repeatedly found that a single item left on the plate exerted a much stronger end-of-meal pull than multiple items, whether it be chocolate-covered almonds, cookies or pizza.

And the [research team](#) further found that people often choose to believe the unbelievable: that last cookie is actually good for them.

No matter that the two inches of sugary icing on top of a 1,000-calorie cupcake suggests otherwise; part of the "clean-the-plate" phenomenon is telling yourself the white lie that one more bite is not really the scale-buster that a silly calorie table might suggest.

As to what's driving the plate-cleaning urge to begin with, Sandon believes that the overriding impetus behind the "cleaning-the-plate" ethos is more about indulging than any broad biological survival imperative.

"Such foods are highly palatable and can drive the desire to eat," she said, particularly when it comes to items that are high in fat, sugar or salt.

And that, said Sandon, means that a "strategy to combat this may be to eat foods with less fat, added sugar and salt. You rarely hear people say I just need to eat that extra bite of broccoli but I am so stuffed. But they will do it with the chocolate cake."

Diekman suggested that "slowing down your eating also helps. It takes time to feel satisfied and fast eaters miss that feeling."

Another strategy, according to Sandon, "is to start with smaller serving sizes at meal and snack times. Simply put less on the plate to start. But

again, this takes self-regulation. Using portion-controlled packages or containers may help with this as well."

But, she added, "awareness and mindfulness may be the best strategy. Taking a moment to notice your thoughts and what you are telling yourself when you are tempted to take that last bite despite feeling full."

The report will be published in the February issue of the journal *Appetite*.

**More information:** Lona Sandon, Ph.D., RDN, LD, program director, and assistant professor, department of clinical nutrition, school of health professions, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas; Connie Diekman, R.D., M.Ed., director, university nutrition, Washington University, St. Louis, and former president, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; February 2019, *Appetite*

There's more on healthy holiday foods at the [U.S. National Institutes of Health](#).

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