

New study: Can a healthy food sample lead to unhealthy purchases?

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Big box stores often hand out complimentary food items to customers, and these foods can vary in terms of healthfulness. Would getting a complimentary healthy food item versus an unhealthy food item influence subsequent purchases?

In a [new study](#) published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing*

Science, a team of researchers led by University of South Florida Professor of Marketing Dipayan Biswas examines this phenomenon through a series of experiments, including four studies conducted in the field.

Here are the main takeaways from their findings:

- Sampling a [healthy food](#) item can lead to the unexpected outcome of buying more unhealthy food. This is especially true when the healthy sample seems very different from the other food choices available.
- On the other hand, when the sampled food and other available options seem similar, consumers are more likely to continue choosing healthy foods.
- Consumers should be aware that sampling a healthy food may give them a false sense of "virtue," potentially leading to [indulgence](#) in less healthy options later.
- To make better food decisions, consumers can consider how similar the sampled food is to what they plan to buy and recognize how this may influence their choices.

"Our study looked at whether a free complimentary healthy food item can actually be bad for you," Biswas said. "What we found was that getting one at a [store](#) or [restaurant](#) can lead consumers to subsequently purchase indulgent foods."

More information: Dipayan Biswas et al, Effects of sampling healthy versus unhealthy foods on subsequent food purchases, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s11747-024-01047-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01047-4)

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