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'Mindless autopilot' drives people to underestimate food decisions

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People estimate that, on average, they make about 15 food- and beverage-related decisions each day. But the truth is, they make more than 15 times that -- more than 200 such decisions.

Commenting on his new Cornell study, Brian Wansink, the John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing and of Applied Economics at Cornell, observed, "So many food decisions are made on mindless autopilot." The problem with making so many more food decisions than we are aware of, he said, is that "each of these small decisions is a point where a person can be unknowingly influenced by environmental cues."

When Wansink and Jeffery Sobal, Cornell professor or nutritional sciences, asked 139 university staff and students to estimate how many decisions they make about food each day, the average response was 15. However, when the volunteers then answered specific questions about when, what, how much and where they ate and who made decisions about meals, snacks and beverages, the researchers found that the staffers and students actually made an average of 221 food-related decisions each day.

The study is published in the January issue of *Environment and Behavior*.

"It's really easier than we think to let small things around us -- plate size, package size, people around us, distractions -- influence these 200-plus decisions because we are not aware of them in the first place," said Wansink.

"Rather than try to overly obsess about our food decisions, it's better to change the environment so that it works for us rather than against us, making it easier to make decisions to eat less," suggested Wansink.

Tips to prevent holiday overeating

To turn things around after a season of mindless eating and prepare for those New Year's resolutions, Wansink offers these research-based tips from his recent book, "Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think" (Bantam Books):

-- Use smaller bowls: People who served themselves foods into smaller serving bowls ate almost 60 percent less than when they are served helpings in larger bowls.
-- See it before you eat it: Avoid eating directly from the package. People served a snack mix in a bowl ate 134 fewer calories than those eating straight from the bag.
-- Bank your calories: Skip the appetizers if you know you want to save room -- and enjoy -- the upcoming dessert. You'll also be more accurate at estimating the number of calories you consumed.
-- Sit next to the slowest eater at the table: Use that person as a benchmark as to how slow you should eat. Always be the last one to start eating, and set your fork down after every bite.
-- Embrace your comfort food: Don't eat around the food you really want. Just eat it in a small portion.
-- To eat less without having to think about it, use the rule of two: Pick two of the following three: appetizer, a drink or a dessert.
-- Use the "half" rule of thumb: Fill half your plate with vegetables, the other half with protein and starch.
-- Think "back": Keep tempting treats in the back of the cupboard or refrigerator wrapped in aluminum foil. Office workers ate 23 percent less candy (around 50 calories) when it was in an opaque covered candy dish than a see-through dish.

-- Always sit at least an arm's length away from a buffet table or snack bowl.

Source: Cornell University News Service

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