

New Discoveries of Environmental Factors that Influence How Much We Eat

1. Larger portions make us eat more.
 - People ate 31% more popcorn when given a free large bucket vs. people given a free medium bucket, although both groups estimated that they had eaten the same number of ounces.
 - People were given either a 2-lb., 1-lb. or 1/2-lb. bags of M&Ms to snack on during a movie. The people with the smallest bag averaged 63 M&Ms, but it increased to about 120 M&Ms with the 1-lb. bag and even more with the 2-lb. bag.
 - In one week, grocery shoppers ate twice as much of items from massive Costco containers of candy, chips, cookies, and granola bars as they did from smaller containers. (It is recommended to repack large quantities into smaller bags to avoid overeating).
 - This finding held for all items tested in a larger package vs. a smaller package. The size of the package seems to cue people as to what's acceptable or normal.
2. We don't realize that we are eating more.
 - Women ate 30% more and men 40% more when given a bowl, which kept refilling with soup imperceptibly from the bottom. Both groups with the refilling bowls guessed that they had eaten the same number of ounces as those using a normal bowl.
3. Container shapes can distort our perception of portion size. For example, people think they are getting more beverage quantity in a tall skinny glass than in a short wide one.
 - In one experiment, people guessed that they had had more in a tall skinny glass which was only 6 1/2 oz., than in a short wide glass which was actually 11 1/2 oz.
4. The proximity to food and its visibility makes us eat more.
 - People ate 9 Hershey's Kisses a day from a clear candy bowl on their desks, 6 1/2 if the bowl was opaque, but only 4 Kisses if the bowl was moved 6 feet away from the desk.
 - People ate 8 baby carrots out of bowl placed next to them vs. only 3 baby carrots when a bowl was placed in the corner of the room.
5. Foods we see in the kitchen that require no preparation encourage us to eat more of them.
 - A cookie jar on the table or potato chips package on the counter encourages more consumption than items stored in the basement.
 - Foods served family style encouraged larger portions than those plated in the kitchen where individuals had to get up from the table to get seconds.
6. Variety and disorganization of food makes us want to eat more.
 - People ate 40% less jelly beans when given 4 colors vs. 6 colors even though all colors tasted the same. More colors seem to make it more inviting to try each one.
 - People were allowed to eat all they wanted of 6 flavors of jellybeans. One group had their jellybeans organized in individual bowls by type and averaged 12 beans per person. The other group had all their beans mixed together in one bowl and averaged 23 beans, almost twice as much. When the variety is disorganized, people seem to eat more to try all types.

7. Anchor messages in grocery stores encourage us to buy more than we would have otherwise.
 - Limit 12 per person.
 - Snickers: buy 12 for your backpack.
8. Descriptively named foods encourage us to buy and eat more.
 - People were offered two identical foods: one was called, “chocolate cake,” the other, “Belgian Black Forest Double Chocolate Cake.” People said they preferred the taste of the second one and wanted more.
 - People were offered two identical energy bars: one was labeled, “contains 10 grams of protein,” the other, “contains 10 grams soy protein.” People said the first bar was good and the second bar tasted terrible.
 - There is a strong link between perception and behavior, rather than reality.

Getting control of portion sizes

1. Keep records of what you are eating.
2. Measure out portion sizes a few times so you get accustomed to how they look on your plates. Use comparative measurements, like 3 oz. meat is about the size of a deck of cards.
3. Learn to read food labels and compare your portions with the serving sizes on the labels to determine how many servings you are eating.
4. Portion out food prior to eating and put the rest away.
5. Eat only when you are hungry.
6. Try to figure out emotional eating triggers. Learn to deal with these emotions in a healthy way.
7. Substitute walking after dinner for sedentary activities like watching television. Take your spouse, friend, or dog along with you. Adding physical activity will help offset some of the calories you eat.
8. Drink water, a cup of tea, or soup before and during meals.
9. Never eat out of a bag or carton.
10. Don't get caught by phrases like, “Super-size it!” and “Get ten percent extra free.” It's not a bargain if you eat more calories and saturated fat than are healthy for you.
11. Eat the foods you want, but eat less of them or have them less often if they are very calorie-dense. Pass on calorie-dense foods when you can.
12. Stop eating when you start to feel full.
13. Share a restaurant portion with someone else, or cut it in half and bring the rest home.
14. Emphasize eating vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes, which are rich in fiber, antioxidants, and phytochemicals. Fat free dairy products in moderation may also help with weight control.
15. Use the research findings to your advantage. Position abundant quantities of various cut-up vegetables where you are sitting to eat more of them. Use tall skinny glasses for your beverages.
16. Most people underestimate how much they eat, so pay attention to the impact of your portions as a potential source of hidden calories.