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HEALTH

Want to Avoid Munching on Unhealthy Foods? Serve Yourself

People who dish up their own candy, cake and other indulgences eat less of them



People who slice their own cake tend to take smaller pieces, a study found. PHOTO: ISTOCK

By *Rachel Bachman*

Updated Jan. 6, 2017 4:02 p.m. ET

For anyone trying to eat better: New research shows the simple act of having to serve yourself can curb unhealthy indulgence. People who choose their own piece of cake—or, even better, cut it themselves—eat less of it. They’re also less likely to eat things like cake at all.

Having to serve yourself doesn’t curb appetites for healthy foods, the study found. It only stopped people from eating unhealthy food.

“If they’re served by someone else, they can outsource responsibility to someone else,” says Dr. Linda Hagen, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business. “But if they serve themselves, they have to accept responsibility and that makes them feel bad.”

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and two co-authors, to be published later this year in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. The experiments found that the less involved people are in serving unhealthy foods, the more likely they are to eat them—and to eat larger portions.

One experiment, conducted in a waiting room at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, centered on food set out for 189 students waiting to be called into an unrelated management study. The students arrived in several separate groups and were greeted by a sign: "Have yourself a little snack."

Researchers tested various scenarios with two snacks: dried fruit, which students rated as relatively healthy, and Reese's Pieces, which they rated as unhealthy.

When portions of the Reese's Pieces were placed into sampling cups, nearly 32% of students took one. But when a big bowl of the candy was set out with a spoon and a stack of cups, none of the 46 students served themselves the snack.

The dried fruit spurred different behavior. A similar number of students took the fruit when they had to scoop it (6.4%) as when it was already placed into cups (16.3%). The difference wasn't significant—people didn't eat more or less healthy food depending on how they got it.

The results are notable because the experiment took place where people didn't expect to eat, Dr. Hagen says. It's those mindless-munching opportunities—the office candy dish, the plate of leftover Christmas cookies—that many find hard to resist.

Previous research has found that the larger portions are, the more people tend to eat.

Some people try to curb unhealthy indulgences by buying food packaged in small portions, but that doesn't always work. Dr. Hagen suggests people empty even smaller-portion packages of unhealthy snacks into a bowl. That will make people feel more responsible for how much they eat and discourage overeating, she says.

The serving lesson holds for meals, too. It's fine to let a family member serve you the healthy stuff, Dr. Hagen says. But if you're going to eat dessert, dish it up yourself.

Write to Rachel Bachman at rachel.bachman@wsj.com

Appeared in the January 9, 2017, print edition as 'To Avoid Unhealthy Snacks, Science Says, Serve Yourself.'

