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Contact: Mary-Ann Twist / 608-255-5582 / JCR@bus.wisc.edu

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Eat Dessert First? It Might Help You Control Your Diet

Consumers watching their diet should pay close attention to the amount of unhealthy foods they eat, but can relax when it comes to healthier options, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Although self-control is typically viewed as a battle between willpower and desire, consumers can’t rely entirely on willpower to control their eating. They also need to create situations that will make them lose interest in food. One way is to keep better track of the quantity of unhealthy foods they eat,” write authors Joseph P. Redden (University of Minnesota) and Kelly L. Haws (Texas A&M University).

Some consumers are able to exercise great self-control when it comes to their diets while millions of others can’t seem to stop overindulging on unhealthy foods such as cookies and candies. Do the former have more willpower? Or are they simply satisfied more quickly?

In a series of studies, the authors found that consumers who successfully control their diets eat fewer unhealthy foods because they are satisfied sooner. They also found that many consumers with poor self-control were able to establish greater control when they paid close attention to the quantities of unhealthy foods they consumed because simply paying attention made them more quickly satisfied.

In one interesting study, a group of consumers were asked to eat either a healthy or an unhealthy snack. Some of the consumers were asked to count how many times they swallowed while eating the snack. Consumers who counted the number of times they swallowed were satisfied more quickly even if they otherwise had a low level of self-control. Monitoring how much they ate made consumers with low self-control behave like those with high self-control.

“Dieters should focus on the quantity of unhealthy foods but *not* the quantity of healthy foods. Monitoring healthy foods could actually be counterproductive to the goal of eating a healthier diet. So the secret to success is knowing when to monitor your eating,” the authors conclude.

Joseph P. Redden and Kelly L. Haws. “Healthy Satiation: The Role of Decreasing Desire in Effective Self-Control.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2013. For more information, contact Joseph Redden (jredde@umn.edu) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.



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