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4 Tips To Help You Keep Your Resolution To Eat Healthier And Lose Weight

If one of your New Year's resolutions is to eat healthier and lose weight (my hand is up), Linda Hagen has some intriguing advice for you:

- Eat most of your meals at home, and dish out your food yourself.
- If you do decide to eat out in a restaurant, opt for a family-style or a buffet eatery, where, again, you can serve yourself. ("I understand it's not reasonable to tell people, 'Just never go out to eat,'" Hagen told me.)

Hagen's tips might seem counter-intuitive. After all, who hasn't gone a little crazy at the sight of a bountiful buffet?

But her research suggests that people generally feel guiltier about eating food deemed unhealthy when they're the ones dishing it out. As a result, they're likely to end up with less on their plate than when someone else serves them.

When someone else cuts that hunk of cake or scoops out that bowl of ice cream and serves you, however, it's easier to rationalize the indulgence. After all, it's not *your* fault it ended up on your plate, and it would be a shame to let it go to waist. I mean waste.



You're likely to eat less cake and other foods you consider to be unhealthy if you serve yourself instead of letting someone else do it, research suggests. (Shutterstock)

Hagen, an assistant professor of marketing at the USC Marshall School of Business, and her coauthors conducted five experiments to test how serving yourself or having someone else serve you could affect how much you eat. The experiments also tested whether the nature of the food, i.e. "healthy" or "unhealthy," made any difference (the scientists, acknowledging that such labels are subjective, polled college students to determine which foods were which). The [findings](#) have been posted online by the *Journal of Marketing Research* and will appear in print in an upcoming issue.

In one experiment, the researchers set up a small table for two days in the lobby of a Midwestern university's business school, where groups of students waited to participate in an unrelated management study. A letter-sized poster on the table said "Fall Snack Bar—Have yourself a little snack."

At different times during the day, the table held either a "healthy" snack of mixed dried fruit or an "unhealthy" snack of Reese's Pieces. Sometimes the snacks were in a big bowl, and students had to scoop them out into small cups, while other times the snacks were in pre-filled cups.

Turns out none of the students helped themselves to the Reese's Pieces when they had to scoop the snack out of the serving bowl, but about a third of the students partook of the pre-filled cups of the candy. That, the researchers wrote, supported their hypothesis that people would eat less of unhealthy food if they had to portion it out themselves. But when it came to the healthy dried fruit, about 6% of the students served themselves, while only 16% took a pre-filled cup, a difference small enough that could have been due to chance.

"These results suggest that how much physical involvement is required to help oneself to food (less vs. more) may have quite a powerful effect," the researchers wrote.

I couldn't help but wonder whether the effect might be different depending on whether a person was overweight. Would people of normal weight be more likely or less likely than overweight or obese people to feel guilty about serving themselves a hearty portion of a high-calorie dish? But Hagen and her coauthors did not ask their subjects about their body mass index (BMI), so she couldn't answer my question.

"This effect will be stronger for some people than others," acknowledged Hagen, whose last name happens to be pronounced the same as the first name of that really high-fat [brand of ice cream](#). "Some people just don't feel as bad about unhealthy eating." And, she said, some people might mistakenly think a dish is healthy when it's actually loaded with calories.

Hagen did speculate that, although four of her five experiments were conducted with college students, the findings probably would hold true for older people. One possible difference, she said, might be that younger individuals would feel guilty about eating unhealthy foods because of the potential impact on their appearance, while older individuals might be more concerned about the impact of such foods on their health.

But even if you serve yourself a modest portion, what's to stop you from going back for seconds or thirds? Hagen has two more suggestions, based on research by others, that you could help you resist multiple servings at home:

- Use a smaller serving bowl instead of one that could double as a punch bowl. "The larger the serving bowl, the more people end up eating," Hagen said.
- After you've served yourself a portion, put the leftovers out of sight in the refrigerator or a kitchen cabinet. If you must keep non-perishables on your counter, at least make sure they're in opaque containers, not, say, a clear glass cookie jar. What you can't see can't tempt you as much.

In their latest experiments, Hagen and her coauthors, Aradhna Krishna of the University of Michigan and Brent McFerran of Simon Fraser University in British Vancouver, have given their subjects the choice of serving themselves or being served.

Not surprisingly, when the food is considered to be unhealthy, Hagen said, "people are vastly more interested in having someone serve them."