

When a salad is not a salad: Why are dieters easily misled by food names?

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Dieters are so involved with trying to eat virtuously that they are more likely than non-dieters to choose unhealthy foods that are labeled as healthy, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. It seems dieter focus on food names can work to their disadvantage.

"Keeping your weight-loss goal in mind as you scan the lunch menu at a café, you are careful to avoid pasta selections and instead order from the list of [salad](#) options," write authors Caglar Irmak (University of South Carolina), Beth Vallen (Loyola University), and Stefanie Rosen Robinson (University of South Carolina). "But before you congratulate yourself for making a virtuous selection, you might want to consider whether your choice is a salad in name only."

These days, restaurant salads can include ingredients that [dieters](#) would be likely to avoid (meats, cheeses, breads, and pasta). Potato chips are labeled "veggie chips," milkshakes are called "smoothies," and sugary drinks are named "flavored water." Why are dieters, who are supposedly more attuned to healthy foods, likely to be confused by these labels?

"Over time, dieters learn to focus on simply avoiding foods that they recognize as forbidden based on product name," the authors explain. "Thus, dieters likely assume that an item assigned an unhealthy name (for example, pasta) is less healthy than an item assigned a healthy name (for example, salad), and they do not spend time considering other product information that might impact their product evaluations." Non-dieters do not learn to avoid foods based on names and, given that they

are not focused on healthful eating, are more likely to dismiss cues that imply healthfulness, including name.

Participants in one study were presented with a mixture of vegetables, pasta, salami, and cheese, served on a bed of fresh romaine lettuce. The item was either identified as "salad" or "pasta." When it was called pasta, dieters perceived it as less healthy. In another study, participants were given samples of a product, which was labeled either "fruit chews" or "candy chews." "Dieters perceived the item with an unhealthy name (candy chews) to be less healthful and less tasty than non-dieters," the authors write. As a result, dieters consumed more of the confections when they were called "fruit chews."

More information: Caglar Irmak, Beth Vallen, and Stefanie Rosen Robinson. "The Impact of Product Name on Dieters' and Non-Dieters' Food Evaluations and Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2011. Further information: ejcr.org

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