Health consciousness: Do consumers believe healthy food always tastes bad?

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Why are health awareness campaigns failing to reduce skyrocketing obesity rates? According to a new study in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, consumers continue to make their eating decisions based on taste alone.

"Despite a recent trend toward healthy eating behaviors, many consumers still tend to overconsume unhealthy foods because of two facts that work in combination," write authors Robert Mai and Stefan Hoffmann (Kiel University, Germany). "Unhealthy is widely associated with being tasty, and taste is the main driver of food decisions. There is little research on the conflict between healthiness and tastiness."

Study participants were given a variety of yogurts that differed in sugar and fat quantity. Even when they were given better information about the ingredients, this was not a sufficient to encourage choosing the healthier yogurt. The strategy was especially ineffective for those eaters who needed it most, because the least health-conscious eaters were also the least likely to take any new health information into consideration.

Even though some health-conscious eaters modified their behavior slightly when given better information on the product, both the informed and uninformed unhealthy eaters expressed firm opinions that the less healthy yogurts were tastier. It was this tastiness factor that, in the end, drove the decision-making for both healthy and unhealthy eaters, and it could not be overcome simply by raising health consciousness.

"Policy planners must instead find ways to make healthy foods more appealing, by improving the actual taste as well as the packaging and marketing, and by investing in social campaigns which work on consumer's emotions and encourage a sense that healthy eating is 'cool' and prestigious. Overall, a holistic approach is urgently needed in which food companies, consumers, and policy makers, instead of working against one another, manage to find mutually beneficial strategies to combat the world's alarming obesity epidemic," the authors conclude.

  More information: Robert Mai and Stefan Hoffmann. "How to Combat the Unhealthy = Tasty Intuition: The Influencing Role of Health Consciousness." *Forthcoming in the Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

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