Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Making the 'see food' diet work for you

I started keeping a bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter to encourage my family to eat more produce. It works. What are some other ideas to help us eat more healthfully?

Putting healthful food within arm's reach is a tried-and-true technique for helping make good food choices. There's plenty of research to back that up — and it works both ways.

A recent study at The Ohio State University found that compared with normal-weight people, obese people tended to keep more food visible not only in the kitchen, but throughout the house. They also generally ate more sweets and other less healthful foods than their counterparts. It's as if that old (not funny) joke were true: "I'm on the 'see food' diet. If I see food, I eat it." Clearly, the food environment around us matters.

Cornell University's Brian Wansink has been called the eating behavior guru. In a recent article in the journal Psychology and Marketing, he analyzed 112 studies and concluded that most people make food-related decisions based on three elements: They select foods that are convenient, attractive and "normal." So, when a bowl of fruit is the first thing you see when you enter the kitchen, and it's attractively displayed in a nice bowl, you will more likely choose to eat fruit rather than the stale corn chips on a shelf in a back corner of the pantry.

There's a bit of overlap in the three aspects of food choice, but they're all worth knowing more about:

- **Convenient.** The concept of convenience includes both physical and mental effort. Put healthful foods at the front of the refrigerator, ready to grab and go. Buy 100-calorie packages of snacks instead of trying to guess what a reasonable portion is. Find restaurants that, as

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their standard options, serve fruit or vegetables on the side instead of fries or onion rings and include bottled water, unsweetened ice tea or even milk with meals instead of soft drinks.

- **Attractive.** Making food attractive has to do with all manner of presentation, from how it is served to how much it costs to what it is called. Wansink's research shows that more children will eat broccoli when it's called "Dinosaur Trees." The same is true when vegetarian burritos are served as "Big Bad Bean Burritos." And, serving foods on china increases the value people place on it, compared with normal dishes or paper plates.

- **Normal.** People lean toward food choices that they perceive as the norm. One example of "normalizing" healthy eating is to always put salad bowls on the dinner table, even on days when salad isn't being served. That makes it seem like salad is a standard part of every dinner, rather than as an infrequent side dish.

Wansink calls this the CAN approach — short for "convenient, attractive, normal" — and he says the opposite is also true: Making less-healthy food less convenient, less attractive and less normal can decrease its consumption. Put less-healthful snacks in a cupboard in the laundry room, he suggests, or try the cupboard above the refrigerator. Learn more at his website at foodpsychology.cornell.edu.

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