

What Makes Us Overeat?

Most of us would like to think that we're in charge of how much we eat. We trust our bodies to tell us when we're full, and that after we're done, we have a good sense of how much we've eaten.



If only it were true. "Research tells us that subtle cues in our environment can pressure us to dish up more than we need and eat more than we should," said [Luigi Gratton, M.D.](#), vice president of medical affairs at Herbalife. "Larger plates – even larger serving utensils – can prompt over-consumption." In a self-serve ice cream experiment¹, people given large bowls and scoops doled out 57 percent more ice cream than those given smaller dishes and serving utensils.

So, how much we're going to eat is generally decided before we even take that first mouthful. The reality is we pretty much eat whatever we're served – whether it's a little or a lot. From a supersized fast-food meal to a dainty portion in an upscale restaurant, we're generally satisfied as long as we've polished off every morsel. Rather than letting our stomachs decide, we let an empty plate signal an end to the meal.

Controlling how much you put on your plate really becomes the first step in controlling how much you put in your stomach. But other cues can trigger overeating, too. Just smelling or seeing food – anything from the smell of fresh-baked bread to the sight of stale donuts in the company lunchroom – can trigger your desire to eat, even if you're not hungry. Here are some ways to take charge:

- Think spoon, not shovel - It's an old trick, but it really works - using smaller plates and tall, skinny glasses gives the illusion that there is more food on the dish and more to drink in the glass. Smaller serving utensils help keep you from loading up, too – think spoon, rather than shovel.
- Single-serving sizes - As serving containers get larger, so do portions. Those huge bargain-priced cereal boxes may be leaner on your wallet, but studies show you'll pour yourself a lot more cereal– as much as 20 percent more – than you would from a regular-sized package. Go for the single-serving sizes.
- Out-of-reach sweets - Make it inconvenient to eat the unhealthy stuff. You may not make the effort to bake brownies from scratch when the mood strikes, but if you keep the microwavable version around you'll have to constantly fight the urge. Get the candy dish off your desk and the cookie jar off the counter – set out a bowl of fruit instead.
- Mix it up, but not too much - Studies show that the more variety on your plate, the more you'll eat – all that stimulation keeps your taste buds in high gear. An array of low-cal fruits and veggies is fine, but when faced with a buffet or a dinner served family-style, limit yourself to just a couple of items on your plate at one time.
- Shake it up - Try a [protein shake](#) for breakfast or lunch. Made from a set amount of milk, protein powder and fruit, it's a natural when it comes to portion control. Add some ice cubes, and whip it up to increase the volume without adding calories – and enjoy from a tall glass.

¹Wansink, Brian, Koert van Ittersum, and James E. Painter (2006), "Ice Cream Illusions: Bowl Size, Spoon Size, and Self-Served Portion Sizes," American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 31:3 (September), 240–243.