



## Environmental cues encourage healthy eating

**Most people know how to distinguish healthy foods from less healthy foods. But in spite of detailed and easily accessible information, consumers often choose fatty and sugary foods. Researchers of the University of Bern and the Bern University of Applied Sciences have been able to show that environmental stimuli influence our eating habits. They propose several interventions to facilitate the choice of healthy food regardless of the consumer's willpower. Environmental cues can also help people who want to lose weight.**

More and more people worldwide are overweight or obese and are finding it difficult to maintain a healthful weight. This has an impact on the healthcare system: between 2002 and 2012 the direct and indirect costs of overweight tripled in Switzerland and reached CHF 8 billion. Healthy eating campaigns rely heavily on providing information. However, it has been shown that knowledge has a limited influence on our food choices because motives such as hunger, pleasure or reward play a big part in our behaviour. Especially in Western countries, external cues – such as those used in advertising – tempt us into consuming foods with a high fat and sugar content. In their NRP 69 project, researchers of the University of Bern and the Bern University of Applied Sciences were able to show that this effect can be reversed: environmental cues can also activate the desire to eat healthily and therefore support people in making healthful choices.

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The researchers put up posters showing different images next to snack dispensers and evaluated the choices made by consumers. The result: if the posters featured landscapes, sports or a figure sculpted by Alberto Giacometti, people chose healthy snacks more often than if the posters showed a hedonic fun fair or if there was no poster at all. This shows that cues in our environment can motivate us to make healthful choices. In another experiment, the researchers proved

### **Giacometti sculpture can help you lose weight**

The researchers also investigated if different cues triggered different eating behaviours. They established that images of landscapes and sports primarily encouraged the consumption of healthy foods while a Giacometti sculpture encouraged people to eat less. This latter effect was independent of the type of food: test persons reduced the amount of chocolate they ate but also the amount of healthy berries.

This implies that Giacometti sculptures are a weightloss cue. The researchers also observed this effect in a long-term study with people who wished to lose weight. A sticker in their diet diary reminded them daily of their goal and motivated them to eat less. The Giacometti cue worked irrespective of whether a person was aware of its purpose or not.

that these choices are made without effort: while testing potato crisps, test persons had to memorise figures of different complexity (two-digit or ten-digit figures). The results show that they all ate less crisps when exposed to a Giacometti sculpture – irrespective of the cognitive challenge posed by memorising the figure. This implies that the image has an immediate effect and that the intended behavioural change does not depend on an act of willpower. There are various ways of using such cues in daily life (see box).

Further information:  
[www.nrp69.ch](http://www.nrp69.ch)



Posters next to snack dispensers can influence consumers' food choice. Images of a figure sculpted by Alberto Giacometti make people choose healthy foods more often than posters featuring hedonic themes like for instance a fun fair.

### Recommendation

## Application in public and private environments

The targeted use of environmental cues can contribute to more healthful eating habits and support people who wish to lose weight. These results correspond to the strategy of the World Health Organisation (WHO) that aims to promote healthy eating by means of simple decisions. Cues promoting healthy eating

could be displayed in canteens or staff restaurants. Those cues could also be used in a private context. People who want to lose weight can make use of the effect by attaching an image showing a weight-loss cue to their fridge.