

# fat

The sneaky little ways America is making you

**We all eat more than we should. There are dozens of reasons why...and many of them have *nothing* to do with willpower. Here, how to outsmart our calorie-pushing world and stay slim. By Camille Noe Pagán  
Photographs by Jonathan Kantor**

**A few weeks ago** I went to check out the latest Jennifer Aniston flick and decided that I needed a soda and some popcorn to get through two hours of breakup humor. When I placed my order, the kid behind the concession stand extolled the virtues of “the combo”: “For about a dollar more, you can get a large popcorn and large drink with unlimited refills,” he said. What a deal! It was so good that I forgot about the nutritional damage (1,640 calories and 126 grams of fat, to be exact) and shelled out the extra buck. I later learned I’d been had: It turns out that upsizing like this brings big bucks to many theater companies, so much so that they often give salespeople a bonus every time they convince a chump like me to jumbo-size it. I’d fattened their profit margin at the cost of my own waistline.

Food companies of all stripes rely on a variety of research-proven ways to get you to buy and eat more. “Americans are constantly bombarded by seemingly innocuous—and often hidden—factors that can sabotage an otherwise healthy diet,” says Brian Wansink, Ph.D., the director of Cornell University Food and Brand Lab in Ithaca, New York, and the author of the new book *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We*

*Think*. These “fat traps” are lurking around your home, at your favorite restaurants and in your grocery store, and they can cause you to gain up to five pounds a year. Learn here about the sneakiest ways our country gets you to overeat.

**Small sizes aren’t even advertised.** Did you know that Starbucks carries an eight-ounce “short” size drink—even though the 12-ounce “tall” is the smallest size listed on its menu? It’s worth knowing, since a “short” mocha Frappuccino will save you 100 calories and 4 grams of fat and costs less. (Compare the supersizing trend in slimmer-minded countries like Spain, for example, where Starbucks doesn’t even sell a 20-ounce “venti” cappuccino.) Other companies selectively promote larger sizes too: In certain areas of the United States, the smallest size of french fries on the menu at Burger King is a medium, though they do actually carry a small. What’s a diner to do? “Always, always ask,” says James E. Tillotson, Ph.D., a professor of food policy and international business at Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition in Boston. “If it turns out that they only carry a large serving size, request that they serve you half.”

## **Food manufacturers play word games.**

Marketers and restaurateurs know you're more likely to buy food with a yummy-sounding or complicated name, and they label their products accordingly. Proof: A recent study from the University of Illinois found that when a piece of plain chocolate cake was named Black Forest Double Chocolate Cake, people said it tasted better and were more likely to buy it than when it was simply called chocolate cake. Ironically, when foods are labeled as healthy (think "contains soy" or "low-sodium") people sometimes assume they won't taste as good, which means you might avoid buying good-for-you but still delicious options, says Wansink. The lesson? "Focus on eating mindfully and enjoying the taste of your food, no matter how it's labeled," he says.

## **We love variety.**

A study at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Illinois found that people given a bowl of 300 M&M's in 10 different colors ate 43 percent more than those given the same amount of just seven colors (no wonder they roll out new hues for every possible holiday). "When there's just one type, color or variety of food, people have a better grasp of how much is in front of them and are less likely to overeat," says Wansink. "Plus, when there's a variety people like to sample a little bit of everything. That isn't a problem if you're talking vegetables, but it can add on pounds if you're at a buffet." Wansink suggests using the rule of two: After you load your plate with fruit and veggies, serve yourself as much of two items (think macaroni and cheese and chicken salad) as you want, but stop there. "You'll end up eating less than you would have if you grabbed a little of everything," he says.

## **Food ads are everywhere.**

The average American is exposed to about 3,900 calories a day through TV, radio and print ads, says Marion Nestle, Ph.D., author of *What to Eat*. The problem: The more we see food, the more we want to eat it. (A recent survey found that 36 percent of people felt an urge to eat after watching others do so on TV.) "Just thinking about a food increases the likelihood that you'll eat it," says Wansink. The good news: That's also true of healthy foods. So looking at a delicious salad or thinking how you'll feel after you eat it may be enough to take your mind off Olive Garden's bottomless bowl of fettuccine Alfredo.

**Cup holders come standard.** Nearly every gas station in the U.S. doubles as a mini-mart stocked with sodas and Slurpee-like concoctions that often pack several portions into one

grab-and-go bottle. And it's easier than ever to take this kind of liquid candy with you, since the average American car has several cup holders, and they're often expandable. The typical European car? Zero. "If your eyes are on the road, you're not paying attention to how much you're consuming," says Lisa Young, R.D., Ph.D., author of *The Portion Teller*. "You can drink up to 500 calories in less than 10 minutes and never give it a second thought." Young says that if you choose to drink when you're on the go—which, let's face it, is as American as a Hostess fruit pie with apple-flavored filling—make sure it's water or a low-calorie drink.

# How to feel full on less food

**Try the 20 percent trick.** Whatever you plan on eating, with the exception of fruits and vegetables, put 20 percent less on your plate—odds are you'll feel just as satisfied. Wansink found that people can't tell if they've eaten 20 percent more or less than they should have—meaning that you'd feel just as full after about 1 cup mashed potatoes as you would after 1¼ cups. The difference may seem small, but it could translate into a 10- to 20-pound weight gain per year.

**Make your meals appear bigger.** Studies show that people feel fuller when their food looks like a large portion—even if it's just an illusion and not the result of added calories. Pad your hamburger or sandwich with lettuce and tomato so it looks thicker; blend your smoothie with ice to give it more volume; pour your juice in a tall, narrow glass so it seems to contain more liquid; or serve your meal on a smaller plate or in a smaller bowl.

**Eat more slowly.** Simple biological fact: It takes time for your stomach to signal to your brain that it's full. What's more, when you eat quickly, you spend much less time tasting your food—which may leave you feeling unsatisfied even after wolfing down an entire meal, says Paul Rozin, Ph.D., a psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "You can eat six peanut M&M's in one bite, or you can eat them one by one," Rozin says. "If you do the latter, you'll feel more satiated and will have enjoyed your food much more—and you won't have the feelings of guilt that often follow a mindless binge."

get a meal and bring it home, or to eat it at a restaurant," he says. "Sure, those prepackaged microwave foods may take less time—but that's time that you're going to have to spend later getting rid of excess pounds at the gym."

## **Restaurants micro-manage their ambience.**

Wansink's research found that dim lighting caused diners to sit at the table 19 minutes longer than they did under bright lights—and they were 60 percent more likely to order dessert in that time. "Low lighting decreases inhibitions, so you may feel more comfortable eating a lot," he says. Ditto background music. A classic study found that diners lingered longer and ate and drank more when restaurants played soft, pleasant music—although other studies have shown that loud, fast-tempo music can also lead to overeating, possibly because it causes people to rush through their meal. Yes, you can avoid dimly lit restaurants that play any music, but *that's* no fun: "An easier option is to decide what you will order and how much you will eat *before* you get there," says Wansink.

## **We're suckers for convenience...**

The less effort it takes to make a meal or to eat it (e.g., the giant fast-food burrito that takes only one hand to scarf down), the more likely you are to choose it over a healthy but seemingly more time-consuming option (e.g., a grilled chicken breast with sautéed vegetables made at home), according to research. Yes, we Americans put in longer work hours than almost any other culture, but that doesn't mean we have to give up healthy eating. You can cook your own meal from fresh ingredients in about 20 minutes, according to Tillotson. "It takes longer to go

**...and a good deal.** When it comes to food, American shoppers are most influenced by price, says Young, and food manufacturers and restaurants use that to their advantage. For



# “Huge portions

**start to look normal if that's what you see day in and day out. You feel shortchanged if you get a smaller, healthier amount.”**

example, at Hardee's, the difference between a small order of fries and a large is only about 40 cents (but you'll eat 220 more calories). “It costs companies literally pennies to produce larger amounts, and they know you'll pay more for an item if it seems like a good deal, so that adds millions to their company profits,” says Tillotson. But extra-large servings have a lasting effect—and not just on your waistline. “Huge portions at low prices start to look normal if that's what you see day in and day out,” says Young. “[It makes you feel like you've been shortchanged if you get a smaller, healthier amount.” Shop smarter by thinking about the nutrients, not the amount of food, you're getting for your money, recommends Young. And remember the best way to get a deal: Share your jumbo size with a friend.

## Supermarkets set up shopping traps.

You've probably heard the sage advice to shop around the perimeter of the grocery store, where fresh, whole foods tend to be.

But many grocery stores set up “roadblocks”—stands and displays of processed foods throughout the store that are designed to turn you to center aisles, where you'll pick up less healthy foods, says Dave Grotto, the national spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. (Grocery stores want you to buy produce, too, but packaged foods cost less to manufacture and therefore bring in a larger profit.) Grotto's advice: Write a shopping list before you go, and stick to it. Can't find the healthy choices you're looking for? Check out the top and bottom shelves—megabrands buy premium shelf space at eye level to showcase their packaged, processed foods, so you may feel like you have less choices than you really do, says Tillotson. “Remember, there's almost always a healthy option,” he says. “You just need to know where to find it.” ©

*Camille Noe Paquin is a health and psychology writer. She lives in Chicago.*