Smaller plates, less food waste

A choice architectural experiment in a self-service eating setting

Schmidt, K; Skov, Laurits Rohden; Jespersen, A M; Hansen, Pelle Guldborg; Perez-Cueto, Armando; Mikkelsen, Bent Egberg

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Background and objectives: Unhealthy dietary habits influence individual and societal well-being, since they are associated with the rise of chronic non-transmissible diseases worldwide. Although several campaigns promoting healthier lifestyles have been implemented in Northern Europe, and consequently people are more conscious about nutritional recommendations, low intake of fruit and vegetables remains an issue in Scandinavia, calling for innovative ways of intervention. The aim of this pilot study was to investigate the influence of the portion sizes on the consumption levels of apples and cakes presented during the snack breaks. The hypothesis was that consumers could be nudged to healthier food choices by improving accessibility to sliced apples and make a “healthier” cake portion (small) the default.

Methods: The sample consisted of 391 people attending a congress in Copenhagen, Denmark. People were divided in two groups for snacking during breaks, and were informed that this was for logistic reasons. Two snack tables were set up, one with normal sized plates (usual sizes provided by the caterer, 27 cm) that served as controls (N=145), and a table with smaller sized plates (24 cm) that served as the intervention (N=202). Four students did observation with halved pieces of cake as well as apples served in quarter pieces (intervention) and different colour in each floor; one with normal sized plates (usual sizes provided by the caterer, 27 cm) that served as controls (N=75), and a table with smaller sized plates (24 cm) that served as the intervention (N=145). Participants were allocated to each of the two floors, and informed that this was for logistic reasons. All food waste was collected in designated trash bags (different colour in each floor) and weighted in bulk by students.

Results: Total consumption of cake was 30.2% lower per person and apple consumption was higher by 83.9% per person in the intervention site when compared to control.

Conclusions: This pilot study supports the hypothesis that the presentation of snacks plays an important role in the consumption of fruit and cake among Danish adults. Further, it suggests that such approach could become a supportive tool set for achieving PHN objectives.

Key words: nudging, fruit and vegetables, snacks, healthy eating, consumer behaviour.