

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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Tricky with treats

Studies and experiments employ trickery to find out why United States is so fat

By Andrew Martin
KRT CAMPUS

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — On a brisk fall morning, professor Brian Wansink welcomed four graduate students to his lab for what they thought was a taste test of tomato soup.

Unbeknownst to the students, two of the four soup bowls were rigged to remain full, fed by hidden tubes. Twenty minutes later, the two students were surprised to learn their bowls had supply holes in the bottom and that they had eaten a third more than their colleagues.

That test is one of the experiments the University of Illinois' Wansink has conducted to figure out why people often eat more than they should. Several industries are under pressure to figure out why so many Americans are overweight and what can be done about it.

Wansink is among researchers studying how external factors from packaging to advertising to dining companions influence eating behavior. Experiments show that people do not necessarily stop eating when their stomachs tell them to.

"People believe they're pretty good at calibrating what they eat," said Wansink, 43, who studies the psychology of food. "I don't think they are. I think they rely on benchmarks, essentially the fill level of the bowl. There tends to be this visual cue that you're full."

During two years of Wansink's soup experiment, students with bottomless bowls tended to eat 40 percent more than test subjects with regular bowls.

"I wasn't aware of it," said Nina Huesgen, one of the students with a trick bowl. "That's why I feel so filled up, I guess."

Jason Stokes, who was similarly duped, said, "I did notice that my bowl level wasn't going down very much, but I thought that was because I wasn't eating very much."

The soup test is one of the methods Wansink has used to show that people often struggle to control their eating. People will shovel in a bucket of popcorn even if it's stale, and they'll gobble one candy after another if it's within arm's reach, Wansink has found.

The research by Wansink, a professor of marketing, nutritional science and agricultural economics, is particularly relevant because recent studies have shown that portions in restaurants and in homes have increased in the last few decades, most notably in "super-size" fries and soft drinks offered by fast-food restaurants.

Recognizing the importance of portion size, the federal government is reworking the serving-size section of the nutrition facts label on food packages to try to make it more useful to consumers. The current description of serving sizes is so confusing that consumers may be underestimating how much they are eating, the Federal Trade Commission said in a recent letter to the Food and Drug Administration, which had sought comment from other federal agencies on controlling obesity.

The FTC also questioned whether serving-size information on the food label was "sufficiently clear and prominent."



THOMAS FRANKLIN • KRT CAMPUS

Monclair State University students Julie Betz, left, and Liza Patterson decide on what they will eat for lunch at the Red Hawk Diner at Monclair State in New Jersey. Students around the country have been the subject of some tricky studies to find out about eating habits of individuals and to see at what point people quit eating.

Some argue that the food industry should help by crafting smaller portions in supermarkets and in restaurants. But persuading food packagers to encourage less eating will be a tough sell, analysts say, because companies make more money if they sell more food.

Some nutritionists say the increase in portion size has fueled the obesity epidemic, but Barbara Rolls, a professor of nutritional sciences at Penn State University, said it is difficult to prove that the increase in portion size causes obesity.

The focus on where and how people eat needs to continue, said Rolls, who has conducted research similar to Wansink's.

"I think it needs to be easier for people to eat healthier," she said. "It's too easy for us to eat huge portions of high-calorie food."

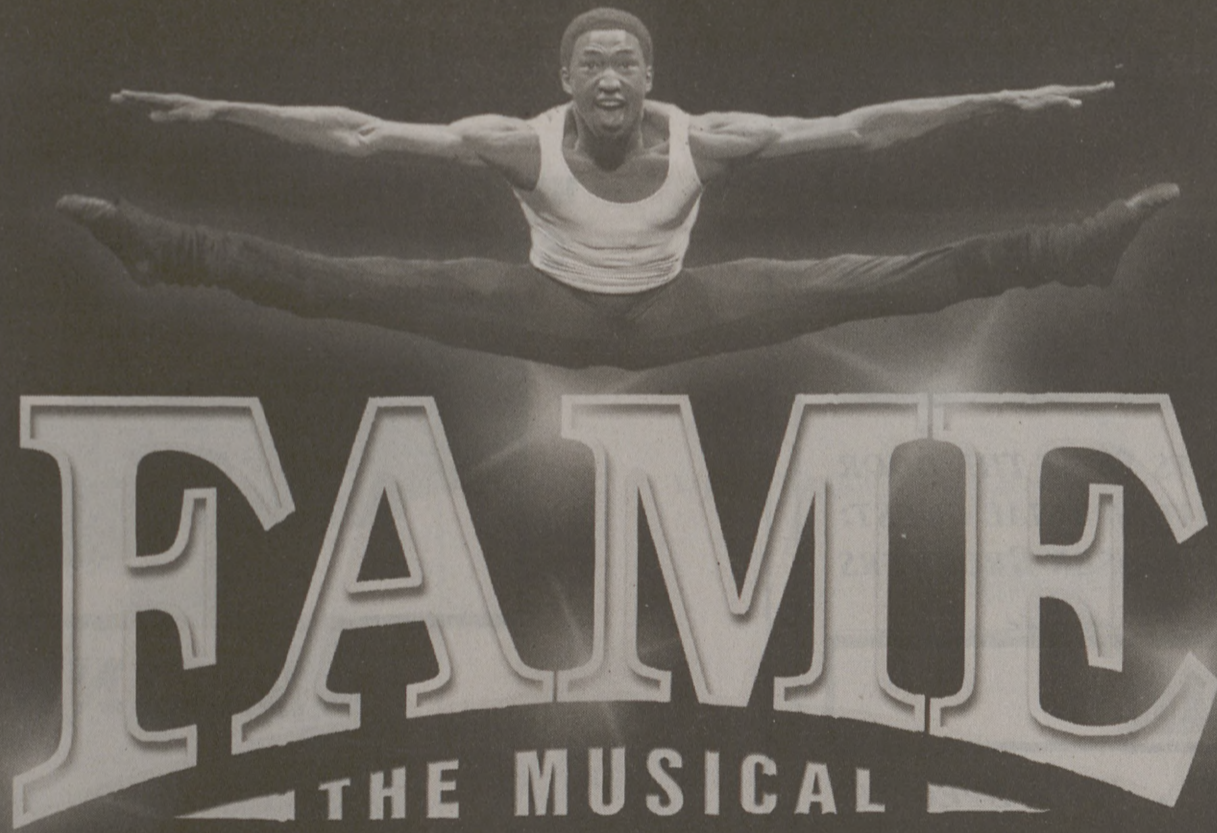
In Rolls' research, she offered men and women different sizes of

submarine sandwiches over four days. When served a 12-inch sandwich as compared with a 6-inch sandwich, men ate 56 percent more than the men given a 6-inch sandwich while women served the longer sandwiches ate 31 percent more than their counterparts who received the shorter sandwiches.

Wansink said he believes portion size is a factor that contributes to obesity, along with such features of modern life as elevators and computer games that discourage exercise.

"In the obesity war, portion size is the first casualty," said Wansink. "It's easy to point at, and we don't have to take

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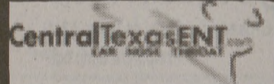
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