

The Calories-Must-Be-Bad Bias: How the Belief that Calories Are Unhealthy Increases the Choice Share of Less Nutritious Options

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Abstract

Public policies have long aimed to both limit calorie intake and improve diet quality. Four studies document a novel pervasive bias that can impede these longstanding efforts. We show that individuals tend to believe that all calories are bad. Individuals insufficiently realize that nutrient-dense foods may also contain many calories. This calories-must-be-bad bias shifts calorie perceptions of unhealthy (healthy) foods upwards (downwards). In turn, calorie posting can reduce the perceived nutritional value and choice share of more nutritious options. We identify poor nutrition literacy as a catalyst of this effect, and we propose an intervention to mitigate it.

Subject Areas: *Consumer Behaviour, Decision-Making, Public Policy*

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