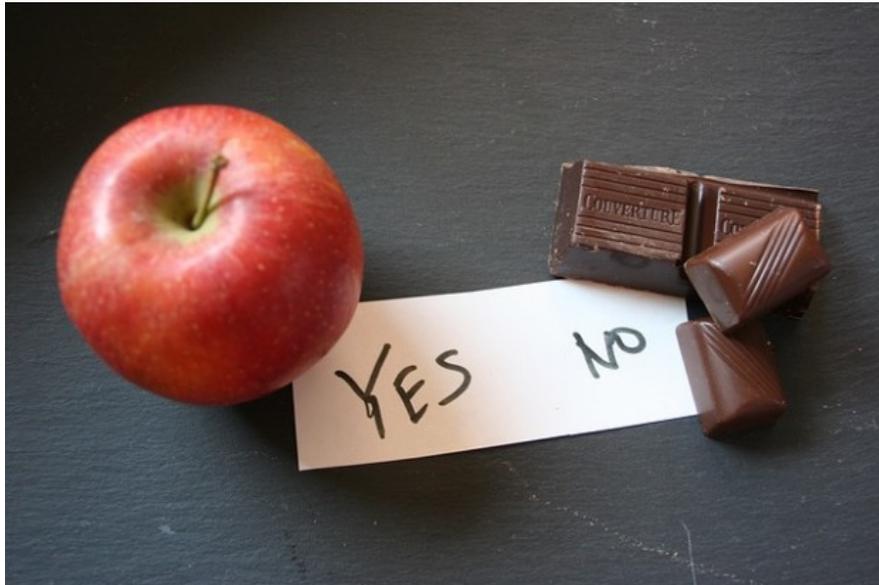


Nudging to healthier food choices



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Most people generally know that for good health we should be eating more fruits and vegetables and less junk food. When it comes to actually making healthier food choices, however, many fail to follow through: statistics show that few Australians are following the dietary guidelines for intake of vegetables and discretionary foods. Behavioural sciences are increasingly being applied within nutrition to explore the psychology behind what we choose to eat and develop strategies for “nudging” consumers towards healthier behaviours. Could the solution to a healthier population lie in subconsciously influencing our choices?

Influencing our automatic decisions

We operate according to two different thought processes: deliberative and automatic. Deliberative thinking requires a lot of effort so we tend to make most decisions automatically, based on intuition and without thoroughly considering all the alternatives. Based upon scientific knowledge from cognitive psychology and economics, the concept of nudging takes this limited capacity for decision making into account and employs strategies to make it easier for us to make decisions.^[1]

^[2]Nudging works by altering a variable within the choice architecture (the environment influencing our choices), making a particular option easier to choose

than the alternatives. The aim is to achieve behaviour change in a predictable way without changing the alternatives, forbidding particular choices or giving penalties, rewards or incentives.^[1]

Informational campaigns may not reach everyone

Results from the most recent Australian Health Survey showed that only 7% of Australians consume the amount of vegetables recommended by the Australian Dietary Guidelines. The survey also revealed that over a third of Australians' daily energy intake comes from discretionary foods high in saturated fat, salt, sugar or alcohol. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of mortality globally and despite a small decline over recent years are estimated to account for 91% of total deaths in Australia. Given most deaths from NCDs can be linked to common risk factors including an unhealthy diet, strategies that make it easier, and more practical and cost-effective for the population to make healthier dietary choices are encouraged by the World Health Organization. In particular, the WHO notes collaboration between authorities and the food industry should improve access to healthier alternatives.^[3]

Purely informational campaigns about the benefits of healthy food choices may produce only moderate behaviour change as individuals may accept the information presented, but not necessarily act on it.^[1] Further, nutrition labelling such as traffic light or star systems can have a limited effect in increasing sales of healthier foods as these strategies are most effective on those who are already health conscious but often fail to reach those who follow the system inconsistently or are disinterested in their health.^[4] In contrast to the seeming failure of traditional strategies, creating change in choice architecture has been noted as one of the most cost-effective and efficient methods of producing dietary behaviour change at a population level, and nudging may help to reach those groups overlooked by other strategies.^[5]

Nudging in practice

Nudging research mainly focuses on four variables: placement, portioning, price and labelling or signage. In supermarkets, for example, signage and store layout can influence purchasing choices, as can the size and design of shopping trolleys.^[4] A recent review of studies found that altering placement was the most effective strategy for producing behaviour change: order manipulation of foods nudged participants towards healthier choices in almost 90% of studies.^[6]

GreeNudge in Norway has implemented nudging strategies for supermarkets, food services providers and hotels in the Nordics, discovering that order manipulation of buffet dishes and signage can influence diners' choices.

When placed first in the buffet, fish was chosen by more diners and fewer chose meat. When “Eat Smart” signage was also added to the fish dish, the number of diners choosing this dish increased again, as did the amount each person consumed. [7] Placing salad first produced a similar effect, although another trial found that adding signage actually decreased consumption of a salad, but had a positive effect on unlabelled vegetable dishes elsewhere in the buffet, prompting 15% more diners to choose the other vegetables. [8] Another study found that although fewer diners chose a vegan dish placed first in the buffet line, this seemed to prime diners to choose other vegetable dishes and fish dishes, reducing the number who chose meat. [9]

Nudging has also started to gain attention in Australia with [VicHealth recently trialling nudging strategies](#) to promote physical activity in workplaces and encourage patrons to drink more water at pubs and stadiums. Sales of sugary drinks in a hospital cafeteria were also reduced by 12% and sales of healthier alternatives increased by the same amount when the healthier options were more prominently displayed.

What about the ethics of nudging?

Although nudging has produced positive effects, there have been concerns raised about the ethics of influencing the behaviour of consumers without their knowledge or consent. Researchers from Monash University, however, argue that [nudging only alters choice architecture and does not actually take the final decision away from consumers](#). Furthermore, [guest satisfaction was also measured during a GreeNudge intervention and was found to be at least the same or higher after the intervention](#). Implementing nudging strategies could therefore be a useful tool in helping us make healthier food choices and assist in reducing the prevalence of NCDs.

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Originally from New Zealand, Sandra has been living in Oslo, where she recently completed a Bachelor in Public Health Nutrition. She has a passion for nutrition and fitness, with a particular interest in nutrition psychology and digestive health. She is now based in Brisbane, where you can generally find her at the local farmers market, trying out new cafés or enjoying a riverside run.