



## Nudging – How the environment influences our eating behaviour

Nudging strategies specifically vary our environment and can also have a positive influence on our everyday eating behaviour.

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Explainer videos

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## English translation of the German explainer video transcript

### How your environment influences your diet - and how you can trick yourself into eating healthier.

Think for a moment about what you've already eaten today. Did you have your usual curry sausage and chips for lunch in the canteen? Or did you find yourself reaching into the box of pralines next to you at your desk again and again? Our habits and our environment have a great influence on how we eat. Today we're talking about how this can be used, for example in canteens or cafeterias, to encourage us to eat healthier. And you will learn how you can also apply this knowledge at home.

### Why are politicians interested in our diet?

We make many decisions every day, most of them unconsciously and out of habit: which route we take to work in the morning, which products we buy in the supermarket on the way home. Although we always resolve not to buy any crisps, the bag often ends up in the shopping trolley. Actually, most of us are aware of the importance of a healthy diet. According to the Nutrition Report 2020 of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, this is important to 90 percent of Germans. At the same time, however, we consume too much sugar, for example. Similar discrepancies are evident in the areas of exercise or environmental protection. We often know exactly what is right. Nevertheless, we do not always manage to behave accordingly in everyday life.

What may only be a little annoying for you at first has far-reaching consequences for our society. More than half of all Germans are overweight. Obesity often has negative consequences for health. For example, it promotes the development of diseases such as type II diabetes or cardiovascular diseases associated with heart attacks. Almost 20 percent of the annual deaths in Germany are due to inadequate nutrition. So, solutions should be found that contribute to better health behaviour in the sustainable long term. This is considered one of the greatest challenges of public health promotion.

Politicians are aware of the serious consequences of obesity for those affected, but also for society. They are therefore trying to use various instruments to support us in eating healthier. For example, in 2018, the UK introduced a sugar tax on sweetened drinks such as lemonades. The government thus offers financial stimuli for the selection of healthier - i.e. low-sugar - drinks. Other countries rely on sales bans. In some places in the USA, for example, the sale of sweetened drinks is banned in schools. Repressive measures by the state, such as bans on the sale of sweets or a sugar tax, however, tend to meet with little acceptance among the population: such measures tend to be rejected.

For some years now, the concept of nudging has therefore enjoyed increasing popularity. Nudging aims to guide people gently in a certain direction. There are no binding behavioural rules or financial incentives. In contrast to sales bans and taxes, nudging does not restrict freedom of choice. This is why it receives significantly higher approval ratings among the population.

### **But what exactly does nudging mean?**

Nudging addresses precisely the point that we humans do not always act rationally and do not behave as healthily as we would actually like. Through "nudges", the environment should be designed in such a way that we make the healthier or more sustainable choice. The favourable alternative is placed in a prominent position and especially highlighted. Or it is given as a so-called default, i.e. as a presetting. For example, in the canteen there is salad instead of fries as the default side dish. If you want fries, you have to order them explicitly. This works because we often give relatively little thought to possible options, but simply decide on the first option that comes along. Nudges, however, need to be designed in such a way that we can still decide on the other option if we explicitly want that. An example of nudging is putting fruit at the entrance of the cafeteria so that it is seen at first glance. Removing chocolate bars completely from the range, on the other hand, is not nudging because it takes away our freedom of choice.

### **Where can nudging begin?**

We are exposed to numerous temptations every day that test our willingness to make choices and hinder us in our efforts to eat healthier. Our environment often encourages unhealthy choices: chips as a standard side dish, a shelf full of chocolate bars at the supermarket checkout. This is exactly where nudging can start. The possible applications are manifold. For example, nudging can be implemented at the workplace, in the school canteen, in the restaurant, in the supermarket or even at home in one's own four walls.

In the meantime, two aspects have emerged in research as the most effective adjusting screws for change: the availability and the position of food. Healthy eating can be supported especially when more healthier options are available. These should also be placed so that they are easily visible and accessible.

For example, a team from the UK increased the proportion of vegetarian dishes in several university canteens from 25 to 50 per cent. As a result, between 40 and 79 per cent more vegetarian dishes were sold. And the researchers found something else important: Overall, the amount of food sold did not change much. Meat lovers have not simply stopped coming. They have definitely tried a vegetarian alternative.

We drink more water, for example, when additional water bottles are positioned prominently in several places - for example, in colourful baskets or at eye level in refrigerators. The number of water bottles sold in this example is not only increased by offering more bottles. Placing them in obvious and easily accessible places also has a great impact. We choose less of something that is placed further away - and conversely more of it when something is closer. For example, in another study in a canteen, the fruit at the checkout was placed directly in front of the sweets. As a result,

more guests chose fruit. At the same time, fewer sweets were sold. If the vegetarian options are offered first at a food counter and we only see the meat alternatives later, vegetarian food is eaten more often. Ideally, by the time customers reach the unwanted options, they have already filled their plates. Again, the aim is to make the healthier option the easier, automatic choice.

### **Why is nudging not yet used everywhere? Criticism and conclusion**

Perhaps you are now asking yourself why not every canteen is using nudging to help us live healthier lives? Unfortunately, it is not quite that simple. It is not yet clear whether the measures have any long-term effects. For example, we don't yet know whether we still choose fruit instead of chocolate when we visit the canteen three weeks later. Or whether the effect of nudging diminishes over time. Another problem is that the effects may not automatically transfer to other situations. For example, students eat vegetarian food more often in the canteen. At home, however, they continue to eat meat, perhaps even more often, because they abstain from meat in the canteen.

Moreover, critics say that nudges reflect the behaviour that politicians want to see. It limits people's self-determination, especially when nudges are used in a hidden way. These concerns are also shared by respondents to a study on the acceptance of nudging: 49 percent of the participants said they agreed with the statement "people can be manipulated by nudging".

In the same study, however, nudging is generally approved of - 70 percent think it is very good or good.

The use of nudges should therefore always be communicated transparently. One can even go further. If we also receive information about the psychological background of the measures, this strengthens our own nutritional competence.

### **And what does that mean for you personally?**

I have some ideas for you on how you can use the nudging effects in your everyday life.

- Place small reminders in your home about how you actually want to behave. For example, if you want to eat less animal products, you can put a table with the greenhouse gas emissions of different foods on your fridge. That way, you'll be reminded every time you pick something up.
- What works in a cafeteria can also contribute to a healthier diet at home: for example, you can rearrange your fridge and storage cupboards. Place fruit and vegetables as eye-catchers at eye level. Puddings and crisps can go to the back of the fridge, where you might not be able to reach them.
- Good planning and precaution can help reduce impulse purchases of unhealthy foods at the supermarket. Subscription boxes for vegetables, for example, are an option that allows you to nudge yourself several times. Fresh food is delivered to your home once a week. You don't have to go to the supermarket very often and are not exposed to the temptations there. And if you already have the vegetables at home, you can prepare a salad more often as a side dish before they wilt.

I am sure you will come up with many more good ideas for yourself on how to use nudging. It also works in areas other than nutrition. Just go through your everyday life with your eyes open. You now know a trick that will help you to leave the pralines at your desk in the future. Simply place a bowl of sliced fruit next to you and leave the chocolate in the cupboard. "Out of sight, out of mind" literally works here.

## Literature

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