

# Study shows how peer pressure affects consumption

8 July 2014, by H. Roger Segelken

(Medical Xpress)—Are your attitudes toward certain foods shaped by peer pressure rather than science? Recent research conducted by Cornell suggests that's the case.

While some ingredient food fears are justified by objective evidence, others have demonized ingredients and damaged industries. Researchers at the university's Food and Brand Lab surveyed 1,008 mothers about their attitudes toward [high fructose corn syrup](#) and other ingredients.

"We discovered multiple motivating factors behind ingredient avoidance," said Aner Tal, co-author of the report, "Ingredient-based Food Fears and Avoidance," published online June 5 in the journal *Food Quality and Preference*.

"Some individuals may have a greater need for social approval among their reference group and so choose or avoid products as a social display, a phenomenon known as the Prius Effect," Tal added. "Just as purchasing a Prius signals a certain set of beliefs to one's friends or peers, expressing a negative attitude toward certain foods or ingredients could simultaneously allow one to express both self- and group-identity."

What works for Toyota, which sold millions of the environmentally friendly cars to people who care what friends think, could be troubling for the processed food industry. Women who showed a tendency toward epicurean [peer pressure](#) were much more likely to agree with negative statements about a product.

"High fructose corn syrup avoiders expressed a stronger belief that the ingredient gives you headaches, is dangerous for children, cannot be digested, is bad for skin, makes one sluggish and changes one's palate," the researchers reported.

Fears were stronger for ingredients associated with less nutritious food, though changing names, or

rebranding, did alter judgments – high fructose corn syrup-avoiding women were less likely to shun "corn sugar" or "table sugar."

Educating consumers might also do the trick. The researchers noted that participants' views toward [ingredients](#) "became more positive when they were either informed about the history and functions of the ingredient, or informed of the wide range of familiar products that currently contain the ingredient – all factors that contribute to familiarity with the product."

The study also found that ingredient avoiders tended to rely on the Internet for health and wellness information, rather than television. With that in mind, the researchers advised that government agencies, public health departments and industry groups develop science-based websites to help address misinformation, emphasize benefits of the ingredient along with risks, and openly provide a history of the ingredient, its manufacture and its use.

"To overcome [food](#) ingredient fears, learn the science, history and the process of how the ingredient is made, and you'll be a smarter, savvier consumer," said Food and Brand Lab Director Brian Wansink, lead author on the report.

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**More information:** Brian Wansink, Aner Tal, Adam Brumberg, "Ingredient-based food fears and avoidance: Antecedents and antidotes," *Food Quality and Preference*, Volume 38, December 2014, Pages 40-48, ISSN 0950-3293, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2014.05.015](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2014.05.015).

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