Marketers are increasingly using ambient scent as an important strategic tool, with food-related scents being especially common. Ambient scents are widely infused in retail stores, supermarkets, restaurants/cafeterias, and airplane cabins. This research examines the effects of food-related ambient scents on children’s and adults’ product purchases and choices. In light of growing health concerns worldwide, we specifically focus on food-related purchases. The results of three field experiments, one at a supermarket and two at a middle-school cafeteria, show that exposure to an indulgent (i.e., unhealthy) versus a non-indulgent (i.e., healthy) food-related ambient scent paradoxically leads to lower purchases of unhealthy options. The effects seem to be driven by cross-modal sensory compensation. Follow-up lab studies replicate these effects and identify important boundary conditions.

While extant research has examined factors influencing food choices, this is possibly the first study to examine cross-modal effects of food-related ambient scents on healthy/unhealthy food purchases, and also one of the first studies to examine effects of sensory cues on children’s purchasing of healthy/unhealthy options.