



A Short Walk Reduces Chocolate Cravings

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By: Tom Jacobs

For many of us, the ever-present temptation to reach for the chocolate becomes nearly impossible to resist when we're feeling stressed. The combination of deadline pressure and easily available sweets can easily sink your weight-management plans for the day.

But newly published research suggests this dynamic can be circumvented with a bit of folk wisdom: If you sense your craving is about to be triggered, take a short, brisk walk.

A research team led by Larissa Ledochowski of the University of Innsbruck in Austria reports **a 15-minute walk reduces the urge for a sugary snack even in people who are overweight, under pressure, and literally have candy available at the tips of their fingers.**

The findings of this study support the idea that a single bout of exercise can reduce cue- or stress-related cravings.

"When snacking has become habitual and poorly regulated by overweight people, the promotion of short bouts of physical activity could be valuable for reducing the urge to consume at times when the person may be particularly vulnerable," the researchers write in the online journal PLoS One.

Their study featured **47 overweight people (with a mean age of 28) who reported consuming "highly caloric sugary snacks, such as chocolate" on a daily basis.** They were instructed to refrain from eating such foods for three days prior to the experiment.

Once they arrived at the laboratory, they were assigned to one of two groups. **Half took a 15-minute brisk walk on a treadmill (they were told to walk briskly but not breathlessly), while the others sat quietly for that same period of time.** All returned to the lab on another day within a week of their first visit and were assigned to the other group.

After sitting quietly for five minutes (or five more minutes, for those in the passive group), participants completed a Stroop test, in which a series of letters that spell out



one color (say, blue) are presented in a different color (say, red). Participants had to distinguish between the color of the letters and the color the word spells out—a task that has been shown to elicit high levels of stress.

"Then the participants were offered a selection of high caloric sugary snacks," the researchers add. "They were asked to unwrap one sugary snack of their choice and handle it for about 30 seconds, without eating it." Their level of craving and emotional arousal were measured at each point in the process, along with their heart rate and blood pressure.

The researchers found that while the Stroop test did indeed increase stress, which in turn increased food cravings, this effect was lessened for those who had just taken a short walk. Similarly, "opening and handling sugary snacks" increased cravings (as well as participants' pulse rates), "but exercise attenuated these responses."

"The findings of this study support the idea that a single bout of exercise can reduce cue- or stress-related cravings," they conclude.

Obesity is a complex problem, of course, but reducing cravings is clearly a part of the solution, and this study shows it can be done, even with a vulnerable population under stressful circumstances.

So if you sense your stress is building, get up and take a quick walk. And if you stroll by any vending machines or convenience stores, you might want to pick up the pace.

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