

Gum Chewing is Good for the Brain

By Gary L. Wenk, Ph.D.

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Is chewing gum while walking as distracting as texting? Are you just as likely to lose your thoughts because you're busy chewing gum? Does chewing gum make you more alert as well as more attentive to what you're doing? What truly astonished me about a recent study published in *Nutritional Neuroscience* was that someone actually devoted their time and energy to finding an answer to these questions.

What we know thus far is that chewing gum makes you much more alert but has rather variable effects on paying attention. The benefits of gum chewing are particularly impressive if you're sleepy. If you're trying to pay close attention to specific things happening in your environment, such as being vigilant about baseballs being thrown at you, chewing caffeinated gum might be more beneficial than non-caffeinated gum. For some people, gum chewing helps them to multi-task. Someone in your office likely does this while trying to talk on the phone while playing video games and drinking coffee at their desk.

How could gum chewing achieve these benefits? Certainly, the act of chewing is rewarding and can be arousing because it implies that nutrients are on their way to the brain. Also, stimulation of the trigeminal nerve that innervates the jaw muscles is likely arousing. Finally, many gums offer a small dose of sugar that can be arousing by reducing hunger pangs. Some people find that gum chewing helps fight the urge to eat or consume other arousing chemicals, such as nicotine or caffeine.

The scientists who conducted this study were careful to control for the complex effects that different gums introduce to the oral experience and offered their participants either Extra Spearmint, Extra Peppermint, Airwaves Cherry, Extra Cool Breeze, Extra Ice, Airwaves Menthol and Eucalyptus, Airwaves Black Mint and Airwaves Green Mint.

Overall gum chewing significantly increased alertness, quickened reaction time and increased the speed of encoding new information. Also good news: gum chewing does not impair your ability to pay attention by distracting you from your current task.

Sadly, once you spit out the gum, the benefits go with it; there was no persistent carryover benefit on alertness. Now that's something to chew on.

Gary L. Wenk, Ph.D is the author of Your Brain on Food.