Chewing Gum May Help Enhance Alertness and Attention and Help Reduce Anxiety

Background
In today’s world of multi-tasking, lack of concentration and increased stress are challenges that most people face. According to a Wrigley Usage and Purchase Study, over one quarter of teens (26 percent) and 15 percent of adults agree with the statement that “when I am tense or excited, chewing gum helps calm me.” In addition, 28 percent of teens and 15 percent of adults say that “chewing gum is a great way to help me feel more relaxed.”

Psychiatrists and psychologists suggest some of the main reasons people chew gum are to relieve boredom and tension. Chewing gum may also help release nervous energy and provide an outlet for frustration and irritation.

We often seek simple and convenient ways to increase focus and relieve life’s little stresses. What many don’t know is that chewing gum may be an easy solution in certain situations. Research has shown that chewing gum can increase alertness and attention, help relieve daily stresses like commuting or waiting in line and can help improve mood.

Chewing Gum Can Help Focus and Concentration

Consumers have used chewing gum to improve alertness, focus and concentration for decades. Because gum has been recognized for its benefits in helping with alertness at the same time it eases tension, the U.S. Armed Forces have supplied chewing gum to their members ever since World War I. It is still included in field and combat rations today. Many athletes and coaches seem to chew gum to “stay in the game” and ease tension and anxiety. And, some teachers have reversed school policies and encouraged students to chew gum during tests to help increase their alertness and concentration.

Research conducted in the area of chewing gum and cognitive performance is complex, but results are emerging on a number of fronts. A 75-person study at the University of Northumbria, in the United Kingdom, showed that chewing gum appeared to improve people’s ability to learn, retain and retrieve information. Lucy Wilkinson and her colleagues found that chewing gum while performing memory tests enhanced measures of working and long-term memory. One-third of participants chewed gum during 20 minutes of memory and attention tests, one-third mimicked chewing movements, and the remainder did not chew. The tests included questions relating to short-term memory such as words and pictures and the so-called working memory, for example the ability to remember a telephone number. The results showed that gum chewers’ scores were 24 percent higher than the control group on tests involving immediate word recall and 36 percent higher than controls on tests involving delayed word recall.

Other preliminary research conducted in the UK and Germany has reported findings on working memory and immediate and delayed recall with gum chewing. An 83-student study found that chewing gum could aid learning, particularly in a 24-hour recall test. Another 58-person study found a significant positive effect of chewing gum on sustained attention, but not an improvement on participants’ memory function.

More research is necessary to uncover the cognitive benefits chewing gum may provide, but preliminary studies do suggest that it may be an effective way to boost focus and concentration.

Chewing Gum May Help Ease Stress and Tension

While stress is a fact of life, managing life’s smaller stresses may be helped by chewing gum. For life’s little tensions, such as commuting or waiting in line, chewing gum may offer a relaxing antidote and help improve mood.

In June 2006, an online self-perception research study was conducted to determine whether chewing gum can make gum chewers feel less stressed. Overall, this study provides evidence that among heavy gum chewers (defined as those who chewed in the past week, chewed at least four days per week and chewed 11 pieces per week), chewing gum reduced stress while abstaining from chewing gum increased stress. In fact, more than half (56 percent) of study participants agree with the statement that “chewing gum helps me cope with everyday stress.” Everyday stress emotions such as not feeling satisfied, not feeling calm and not feeling content increased when gum chewers abstained from chewing gum.

Chewing gum appears to reduce the level of everyday stress emotions resulting in greater feelings of “calm,” “satisfied,” “relaxed.”

While more research is necessary, these results suggest that chewing gum may be an effective stress reduction tool.

Chewing Gum and Brain Activity

Research shows that the act of chewing gum increases blood flow to the brain. In fact, studies have shown that blood flow to the brain may increase by at least 25-40 percent when chewing gum. Also, preliminary electro-encephalogram (EEG) studies have indicated that chewing gum can influence brain activity by increasing arousal responses. Earlier studies have demonstrated a relationship between increased arousal responses and a more relaxed state.