

High-calorie food is more tempting when time is running out

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In an era when digital technology allows people to stay connected to work, friends and commerce 24/7, life can feel overly busy for many people and time is often considered a scarce resource.

The way people track the passage of [time](#) may seem somewhat arbitrary, but findings from a new study suggest that when people sense that the valuable resource of time is running out to take advantage of opportunities—such as flash sales, online payment windows, videogames or online movies—their desire to consume high-calorie foods increases. In other words, if time is shown moving downwards, such as 60...59...58...57...seconds remaining, then consumers sense an impending exhaustion of a resource, and this triggers a desire to compensate for this deficiency by consuming a different resource: calories. The study abstract is available online in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

Researchers from the Indian Institutes of Management Udaipur/Indore discovered this pattern in one study in which participants were asked to cross out the letter "e" in a passage while a timer counted either from 1 second to 60 seconds, or from 60 to 1. After this task, the participants indicated their likelihood of purchasing chocolate cake or fruit salad. The results showed that participants preferred the high-calorie chocolate cake when time was ticking down, but this was not the case when time was ticking up.

"Our research highlights that the common and innocuous practice of timekeeping can produce unwanted and undesirable consequences in the domain of calorie consumption," according to study author Ankur Kapoor, an assistant professor in the [marketing department](#) at the Indian Institute of Management Udaipur.

Then the researchers explored whether they could change this pattern in another experiment in which participants were asked to complete a word search puzzle. One group saw the timer counting down the seconds, while the other group saw the number of elapsed seconds. Then half the participants in each group were asked to remember instances when they felt like they had sufficient resources, while the other half recalled mundane, everyday events in their lives.

Finally, all the participants were invited to take candies as a token of thanks for their participation. The participants who were exposed to the downward time took more candy than those who saw time moving upward—but only when they recalled mundane events. The effect was not found when people recalled an abundance of resources.

Although this study focused on how the direction of time keeping can influence food choices, the findings suggest that consumers who see time counting down may experience other consequences. People who feel that resources are deficient may become less open to taking risks or participating in pro-social behaviors like volunteering or donating resources. When time is viewed as a resource, downward time-keeping devices may also create a sense of artificial urgency that could affect an individual's attitude in other situations, like meals and conversations.

The investigators hope this study will spur further research to explore other implications of their findings, such as the [psychological effects](#) of monitoring other finite resources, such as money left in pre-paid accounts or battery indicators on smartphones.

"Today, there is an increased ability to monitor things like time, health, sleep and food," according to the authors. "We hope that this research provides initial insights into the subtle effects of direction of resource monitoring,"

More information: Ankur Kapoor et al, The Impact of Time-Keeping Direction on Compensatory Consumption: The Role of Perceived Resource Deficiency, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1149](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1149)

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