Watching the Olympic Games could make you eat more

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Ever wondered why you reach for a snack after hitting the gym? Research shows that physical exercise often leads to increased food consumption, whether it is treating yourself for a job well done or replenishing the energy you have burned. With countless sports events airing and our screens constantly filled with sports competitions, a new question arises: Can watching sports on a screen also influence how much we eat?

The answer is yes. Our research co-authored with Jannine Lasaleta reveals that watching sports videos can increase candy consumption. But there is more to the story: The difficulty of the sports you are watching plays a crucial role in these effects.

From screens to junk food

We first invited 112 students to the Grenoble Ecole de Management experimental lab to watch a video and test some candies. Half of the students watched a video with men and women playing sports, while the other half watched one without any physical activity. We then gave each student a 70g cup of candy and asked them to judge its quality for three minutes. The students who saw the sports video ate more candy than those who saw the one without physical activity.

Our initial test thus revealed that watching sports videos can boost candy consumption, but here's the twist: male students indulged in far more candy than female students, so maybe the results were triggered by males' consumption. Plus, we were still unsure whether the type of sport watched affected the candy intake.

To learn more, we invited just the female students to watch videos portraying either easy (light running) or difficult-to-perform sports

(athletics long jump, gymnastics, baseball, rugby or rock climbing). Afterwards, the students were invited to test the same candies as before. Students who watched the easy sports video (showing a woman and a man running through different landscapes) ate much more candy (30.1 grams) than those who watched the difficult sports video (18 grams).

We can thus conclude that the ease or difficulty of the exercise shown significantly impacts candy consumption—watching easy-to-perform sports leads to considerably higher candy intake than watching difficult ones.

Why is this happening?

To explain our findings, we looked at research on goal motivation. When people feel they are not meeting a goal, they push harder; but once they see progress, they tend to slack off. For example, after a workout, those aiming to stay fit might feel they have made good progress and then ease up on their efforts. This can lead to a drop in motivation to pursue related goals, like healthy eating.

Research shows that achieving smaller goals (like exercising) can make people feel they have earned a break, which can result in indulging more in food. So completing a workout might make you more likely to reward yourself with extra food than if you had not finished your session. And why are women more susceptible to the phenomenon of eating more candy after watching an easy-to-perform sports video? Simply because it has long been shown that women are more concerned with their weight than men and therefore, their dieting goals are more salient.

Our research suggests that merely watching sports can lead to a sense of vicarious fulfillment of fitness goals. When people can picture themselves doing the activity they are watching, they feel as though they have already exercised, which can lead to more-indulgent food choices.

If they perceive the exercise shown as easy rather than difficult, they can more easily imagine themselves doing it, leading to greater feelings of progress towards their fitness goals. This perceived achievement can make them feel they have earned the right to indulge and influence their search for a reward, often resulting in increased food intake.

So what?

This knowledge can be used by policymakers or marketers who aim to encourage healthful lifestyles. When promoting healthy activities by picturing physical activity that seems too easy, people may feel a greater sense of achievement that could backfire and lead to increased consumption. We suggest showing an easy exercise (like walking or jogging) followed by a tougher one (like sprinting or marathon running) as an alternative solution. This approach can motivate people to start with basic exercises while reminding them that there is still a long way to go to reach their fitness goals. This strategy could offer an alternative to promote physical activity without giving a false sense of accomplishment.

So what is the takeaway for us? Be mindful of how watching sports can affect our eating habits. If you are aiming to stay on track with your diet, watch more challenging sports—it might just help you resist that extra chocolate bar. Moreover, when setting dieting goals, remind yourself that real progress comes from consistent effort, not just imagining yourself doing a workout. Engage in activities that genuinely challenge you, and pair them with mindful eating habits. This way, you can avoid the trap of feeling the fitness goal to be prematurely accomplished and then overindulging.

In conclusion, should you watch the Olympic games if you want to keep up with your diet? Of course, but it might be better to choose the physical activities you find the most difficult to perform—and watch

them without moderation.

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