

New research shows chewing gum could remove that stuck record in your head

April 23 2015



Can't get that song out of your head? Chewing gum could turn off annoying 'earworms' according to new research from the University of Reading.

The study found that people who chewed gum after hearing catchy songs thought less often about the [song](#) than in a control condition. Chewing gum also reduced the amount they 'heard' the song by one third.

Previous research has found that mouthing something to yourself, or even just moving your jaw around, interferes both with short-term memory¹ and imagining sounds². This study, however, is the first to examine what effect chewing gum has on earworms.

As well as helping those who suffer badly from earworms, the results suggest gum-chewing might help reduce other unwanted or intrusive thoughts - especially ones you 'hear'.

Earworms, from the German 'ohrwurm', are catchy tunes that repeat in your [head](#). A recent poll suggested over 90% of the population experience them at least once a week with 15% classifying their earworms as 'disturbing'.

Dr Phil Beaman, from the University's School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences, led the study. He said: "The earworm phenomenon stretches back at least to the 19th century - Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain both referenced the experience in well-known works. The majority of us experience them for only short periods - perhaps just a few minutes - but others can experience them for two or three days which can be extremely frustrating and debilitating. We wanted to explore whether a simple act like chewing gum could help.

"We invited 98 volunteers to take part in our study. After playing them the catchy tunes Play Hard by David Guetta and Payphone by Maroon 5, we asked them to try not to think of the songs they had just heard over the next three minutes but to hit a key each time they did. In the [chewing gum](#) condition, volunteers reported thinking of and 'hearing' the song less often than in no-activity and finger-tapping control conditions."

Dr Beaman says this type of activity could reduce other intrusive thoughts.

Dr Beaman continued: "Interfering with our own 'inner speech' through a more sophisticated version of the gum-chewing approach may work more widely. However more research is needed to see whether this will help counter symptoms of obsessive-compulsive and similar disorders.

In a 2009 study the University of Reading showed that virtually any song can become an earworm. Over 100 people were asked if they experienced earworms, for how long and the types of tunes heard. There was very little repetition in the list, although some artists were mentioned more than once including Pink Floyd, Justin Timberlake and Guns 'n' Roses. A 2012 study by Goldsmith's College also found earworms were a very individual experience.

"It's possible that popular songs are particularly difficult to suppress," continued Dr Beaman. "Our previous research found that people only spontaneously report earworms of songs that they know well - we hope to examine this further in future studies. In the meantime however, the results of this study should be music to the ears for many."

More information: "Want to block earworms from conscious awareness? B(u)y gum!" *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*. DOI: [10.1080/17470218.2015.1034142](https://doi.org/10.1080/17470218.2015.1034142)

Provided by University of Reading

Citation: New research shows chewing gum could remove that stuck record in your head (2015, April 23) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-04-gum-stuck.html>

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