

# Imagining Eating Can Reduce How Much We Eat

October 04, 2011



It's Halloween and your kid has returned from trick-or-treating with a haul of epic proportions. You have a sweet tooth that is hard to deny. How can you fend off your inner candy glutton?

Although we might believe that focusing on a food only will only make us crave it more, a study from researchers at Carnegie Mellon, published in the journal *Science*, suggests that imagining eating the candy may actually help you to eat less of it.

In the study, participants imagined performing 33 repetitive actions, one at a time. A control group imagined inserting 33 quarters into a laundry machine. A second group imagined inserting 30 quarters into a laundry machine and then imagined eating three M&Ms. A third group imagined inserting three quarters into a laundry machine and then imagined eating 30 M&Ms. After all this imagining, the participants were allowed to eat freely from a bowl filled with real M&Ms. The results show that participants who imagined eating 30 M&Ms ate significantly fewer in real life than did the participants in the other two groups.

The authors point out that just thinking about candy or imagining eating any food won't do the trick — you have to imagine eating the specific food in question. They argue that the process of visualization can help to “trick” the brain, substituting for the actual experience of eating. According to the authors, these findings may be helpful in developing interventions that help reduce cravings for unhealthy food, drugs, or cigarettes.