

Crossing paths: Pinpointing when rates of binge eating converge across races

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Existing research shows that rates of binge eating among adult women is virtually identical across race. However, among college age women, it's a different story: Caucasian women are more apt to exhibit binge eating behaviors than African American women, according to a study presented at this month's annual scientific meeting of the Obesity Society.

"We are trying to figure out when the diet trajectory changes, and when it is that African-Americans start to exhibit these behaviors. It's important to look at the eating habits of this group as they may contribute to early onset [weight gain](#) and obesity," said Melissa Napolitano, clinical psychologist at the Center for Obesity Research and Education and associate professor of kinesiology in the College of Health Professions.

In the study, 715 female college students completed an on-line survey about health habits, behaviors and attitudes. Each woman self-reported her height and weight. Answers were then compared to the Eating Disorder Diagnostic Scale, a questionnaire that is used to diagnose a variety of eating disorders, and the [Binge Eating](#) Scale, to gauge the severity of binge eating symptoms.

Binge Eating Disorder is classified by eating amounts of food larger than most people would consider normal within a 2-hour period; a sense of loss of control during these eating periods; eating past the point of feeling comfortably full; and feelings of embarrassment, [depression](#), [anxiety](#) or guilt after eating.

Overall, the African-American students were less likely than the Caucasian students to meet criteria for binge eating and had less severe symptoms. However, researchers found that the predictors of binge eating symptom severity were similar, including depressed mood, and the perception of feeling fat.

The researchers say it is possible that culture plays a role in the diagnosis and that consuming larger portions may not be labeled as such by African Americans.

"These women could be binge eating, but they may have less anxiety and distress surrounding their eating habits, so they don't recognize it as an issue," said Napolitano, adding that more studies are needed to look at differences in eating patterns and behaviors among different cultures.

About 31-33 percent of college students are overweight, and weight gain has been shown to increase during their academic career. In this study 22 percent of Caucasians and 37 percent of African-Americans were overweight or obese. Existing research suggests that binge eating could be a factor in weight gain over time.

Coupled with the fact that rates of obesity are especially high among African American females, Napolitano says it's critical to have tailored treatments and educational programs available for women of diverse backgrounds.

"College age women are at a critical stage in their development, and there's almost no research that looks at binge eating behaviors among African American [women](#). We need to do a better job at understanding these eating practices to help design and evaluate both prevention and treatment efforts," she said.

Source: Temple University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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