

# Feelings of depression and binge eating go hand in hand in teen girls

December 13 2011, By Laura Kennedy

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Teenage girls who feel depressed are twice as likely to start binge eating as other girls are, according to a new nationwide study. The reverse is also true: Girls who engage in regular binge eating have double the normal risk of symptoms of depression.

The findings suggest that young women who display signs of either depression or binge eating should undergo screening for both disorders.

“Binge eating prevention initiatives should consider the role of depressive symptoms ... and incorporate suggestions for dealing with negative emotions,” reports the article, which appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

This study could provide important new opportunities to address the nation’s obesity epidemic, according to senior author Alison Field, Sc.D., an epidemiologist at Harvard Medical School and the Harvard School of Public Health.

The new study is the largest to look at the relationship between binge eating and depression during adolescence, when most eating disorders surface. The study authors defined binge eating as eating a large amount of food in a short amount of time and feeling a lack of control over eating during the episode. The study labeled [girls](#) who ate large amounts of food but did not feel out of control “overeaters”.

The findings rely on surveys conducted as part of the nationwide Growing Up Today Study. The authors focused on girls because eating disorders and depression are more common in females than in males. The researchers analyzed data from nearly 5,000 girls aged 12 to 18 who answered questions in 1999, with follow-up surveys in 2001 and 2003.

Teens and [young women](#) who reported in the first survey that they always or usually felt “down in the dumps” or “depressed” were about twice as likely as others were to start overeating or [binge eating](#) during the following two years.

“The most common approach to obesity has been to focus on eating better and exercising more, but many pathways can lead to being overweight,” said Marian Tanofsky-Kraff, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Maryland. “There is a group of people where it may be more

psychologically driven. Targeting some of these psychological factors might help prevent obesity.”

“Binge eaters or overeaters can be very secretive, so parents may be unaware that there’s a problem. That’s a really important message for clinicians,” adds Field. “If they have patients who are depressed, they need to ask about disordered eating patterns and vice versa.”

The authors note that survey respondents include few youths belonging to ethnic minorities or lower socioeconomic groups, so the study findings might not apply to all populations. In addition, the surveys did not include information on use of medications, such as antidepressants, which might affect outcomes.

**More information:** Skinner, H., et al. (2011). A Prospective Study of Overeating, Binge Eating, and Depressive Symptoms Among Adolescent and Young Adult Women. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. [doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2011.10.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2011.10.002)

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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