

Preteen food choices may help predict eating disorders later

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Researchers aim to identify best age to start preventive efforts.

(HealthDay) -- The food choices young girls make could help doctors predict if they are at risk for developing an eating disorder as teenagers, according to a new study that analyzed food diaries compiled over the course of a decade.

"The study is rare in that it's based on long-term observation of girls during their transition from pre-puberty through adolescence and into [early adulthood](#)," said the study's lead author, Abbigail Tissot, associate director of the division of [behavioral medicine](#) at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, in a medical center news release.

"This study tells us at what age we should be watching for these eating behaviors, giving parents and physicians useful tools for detecting girls at

risk for future eating-disorder symptoms," she said.

In conducting the study, researchers in the medical center's divisions of [adolescent medicine](#) and behavioral medicine examined the types of foods 800 girls as young as 9 years old chose to eat. They compared the percentage of carbohydrates, fats and proteins they ate to their symptoms of [eating disorders](#), such as poor body image, erratic [eating habits](#) and a preoccupation with being thin.

The study, presented recently at the International Conference on Eating Disorders in Austin, Texas, found the percentage of carbohydrates and fats girls ate at around the age of 11 helped to predict increasing dissatisfaction with the body by the age of 14. The researchers noted 15-year-old girls who ate little fat and a lot of carbohydrates were more likely to have erratic eating habits by age 19. This was particularly true for girls who were considered perfectionists.

"We know that perfectionists are at high risk for eating disorders," Tissot explained. "They are so committed to perfectly conforming to an unhealthy and extreme idea of beauty that they get carried away. Unfortunately, these girls who are committed to achieving [thinness](#) no matter what it takes are actually placing themselves at higher risk for being overweight or obese later in life."

The researchers noted their findings could help doctors improve treatment outcomes for eating disorders by identifying high-risk girls at a younger age.

"Eating disorders are notoriously difficult to treat, so prevention is critical," said Laurie Dunham, a registered dietitian at Cincinnati Children's, in the news release. "By assessing protein and fat consumption as early as age 9, we can detect which girls may go on to develop eating disorders and step in to help before things get out of

control."

A separate study based on the same [food diaries](#) also revealed that [girls](#) who skip lunch consumed more calories daily than those who ate lunch.

"Plenty of studies have been done on the effects of skipping breakfast," Tissot noted. "But at a time when kids' school lunch periods can vary widely, few studies have looked at the impact of skipping lunch."

Data and conclusions presented at medical meetings should be considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

More information: The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health provides more information on [eating disorders](#).

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