

# Eating disorder behaviors and weight concerns are common in women over 50

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Eating disorders are commonly seen as an issue faced by teenagers and young women, but a new study reveals that age is no barrier to disordered eating. In women aged 50 and over, 3.5% report binge eating, nearly 8% report purging, and more than 70% are trying to lose weight. The study published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* revealed that 62% of women claimed that their weight or shape negatively impacted on their life.

The researchers, led by Dr Cynthia Bulik, Director of the University of North Carolina [Eating Disorders](#) Program, reached 1,849 [women](#) from across the USA participating in the Gender and [Body Image](#) Study (GABI) with a survey titled, 'Body Image in Women 50 and Over – Tell Us What You Think and Feel.'

"We know very little about how women aged 50 and above feel about their bodies," said Bulik. "An unfortunate assumption is that they 'grow out of' body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, but no one has really bothered to ask. Since most research focuses on younger women, our goal was to capture the concerns of women in this age range to inform future research and service planning."

The average age of the participants was 59, while 92% were white. More than a quarter, 27%, were obese, 29% were overweight, 42% were normal weight and 2% were underweight.

Results revealed that eating disorder symptoms were common. About

8% of women reported purging in the last five years and 3.5% reported binge eating in the last month. These behaviors were most prevalent in women in their early 50s, but also occurred in women over 75.

When it came to weight issues, 36% of the women reported spending at least half their time in the last five years dieting, 41% checked their body daily and 40% weighed themselves a couple of times a week or more.

62% of women claimed that their weight or shape negatively impacted their life, 79% said that it affected their self-perception and 64% said that they thought about it daily.

The women reported resorting to a variety of unhealthy methods to change their body, including diet pills (7.5%), excessive exercise (7%), diuretics (2.5%), laxatives (2%) and vomiting (1%).

Two-thirds, 66%, were unhappy with their overall appearance and this was highest when it came to their stomach, 84%, and shape, 73%.

"The bottom line is that eating disorders and weight and shape concerns don't discriminate on the basis of age," concluded Bulik. "Healthcare providers should remain alert for eating disorder symptoms and weight and shape concerns that may adversely influence women's physical and psychological wellbeing as they mature."

**More information:** Danielle Gagne, Ann Von Holle, Kimberly Brownley, Cristin Runfola, Sara Hofmeier, Kateland Branch, Cynthia Bulik, 'Eating Disorder Symptoms and Weight and Shape Concerns in a Large Web-Based Convenience Sample of Women Ages 50 and Above: Results of the Gender and Body Image Study (GABI)', *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, [DOI: 10.1002/eat.22030](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22030)

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