

Study finds link between sexual harassment and 'purging'—in men

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A study led by Michigan State University's NiCole Buchanan finds men who are sexual harassed are more likely than women to engage in purging behaviors such as induced vomiting. Credit: Michigan State University

Men who experience high levels of sexual harassment are much more likely than women to induce vomiting and take laxatives and diuretics in an attempt to control their weight, according to a surprising finding by Michigan State University researchers.

Their study is one of the first to examine the effects of [sexual harassment](#) on body image and eating behaviors in both women and men.

As expected, women reported more sexual harassment and greater overall weight and shape concerns and disordered eating behavior (such as binge eating) in response to that harassment, said lead author NiCole Buchanan.

But Buchanan said she was stunned to learn that men are significantly more likely to engage in purging "compensatory" behaviors at high levels of sexual harassment. The study is the first to make that connection.

"Traditionally, there has been a [misperception](#) that men are not sexually harassed," said Buchanan, associate professor of psychology. "And while women do experience much higher rates of sexual harassment, when men experience these kinds of behaviors and find them distressing, then you see the same types of responses you see in women – and in the case of compensatory behaviors, even more so."

Buchanan and colleagues surveyed 2,446 college-aged participants – including 731 men – on their experiences with sexual harassment, body image and eating behaviors. The study, online now, will appear in an upcoming print issue of the research journal *Body Image*.

Sexual harassment comes in many different forms, including peer-on-peer harassment, and can lead to symptoms of [anxiety and depression](#), concerns about [body image](#) and dysfunctional eating.

Buchanan said there may be certain features of sexual harassment that are particularly powerful in triggering purging behaviors in males and that further research is needed to examine this possibility.

Eating disorders are increasing among men in the United States, particularly [younger men](#), yet the vast majority of prevention programs are designed for girls and women, the study noted.

"Although boys and men have lower rates of weight/shape concerns and eating disturbances, these issues are still significant and warrant intervention," Buchanan said.

Provided by Michigan State University

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