

Freshman girls know how to eat healthy but lack confidence in their ability to do it

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Female college freshmen understand the benefits of eating healthy foods and know which foods they should include in their diets. But they lack confidence in their ability to act on that knowledge, especially when it comes to getting enough calcium, says a new University of Illinois study.

"The [women](#) in our study weren't very confident about their ability to eat a healthful diet, especially if they had to do something physical like chop vegetables or go shopping. The motivation just wasn't strong if they were at a party or in places where there were other fun choices," said Karen Chapman-Novakofski, a U of I professor of nutrition.

That was especially true for calcium-rich foods, and the expert is concerned about that because a woman's diet in college can affect her later development of osteoporosis.

"Women optimize bone mass when they're about 18 years old so we're talking about an important time for them to be consuming calcium," she said.

The women did feel confident about choosing low-fat foods even when it was difficult.

Co-author Leia Kedem, a dietitian and nutrition educator with U of I Extension, was not surprised by this finding.

"It's understandable because there are many more choices when it comes

to low-fat foods, and women have developed strategies for dealing with high- versus low-fat choices. They can have chicken instead of ground beef or have a salad instead of a Reuben. There are fewer ways of including calcium-dense, even fortified, foods in your diet, so it's even more important to have a strategy for including dairy foods," Kedem said.

The study explored the effects of self-efficacy, or a woman's confidence in her ability to engage in a certain beneficial behavior in a challenging situation, and outcome expectation in 268 female college freshmen enrolled in the U of I's Peer Education Exercising and Eating Right (PEER) program.

Participants completed questionnaires that included questions about the student's predicted behavior when she was confronted with difficult choices. Choices included: when you are really busy with school, when you are not hungry, when you are really hungry, and when foods are a lot of work to peel/cut/prepare.

A previous article by the authors, published in the American Journal of Health Behavior, showed that the negative effects of "trigger situations" and "social pressure" were the same for normal-weight and overweight women.

In that study, female college freshmen completed a questionnaire that included such items as: I think a lot about being thinner; I am worried about gaining weight; and I like the taste of fast foods.

The data showed that normal-weight women were just as likely as [overweight women](#) to eat when they were depressed, bored, or stressed. Overweight women were more concerned about their weight, but confidence in being able to eat in a healthful way was the same between the two groups, she said.

Chapman-Novakofski emphasized the need for helping women develop strategies to use in difficult situations.

"We know that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors all influence each other to affect behavior. If a student has strategized ways to stick to a healthy diet in challenging situations, she will be more likely to be committed to her goals and to achieve them," Chapman-Novakofski said.

More information: Chapman-Novakofski, Leia E. Kedem of U of I Extension, and Ellen M. Evans of the University of Georgia are co-authors of "Psychometric Evaluation of Dietary Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectation Scales in Female College Freshmen," which is available pre-publication online in *Behavior Modification*.

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