

Nearly all adolescents have eating, activity or weight-related issues

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Credit: University of Minnesota

A new study from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health found that nearly all young people have struggles with eating, activity and weight as they move from adolescence to adulthood.

"Only two percent of females and just seven percent of males surveyed never had an eating, activity or weight-related problem," said lead author and Professor Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D., M.P.H. "This means that practically everyone is affected at some point by one of these concerning issues that are harmful to their health and that could also affect the health of their future families."

The study was recently published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Neumark-Sztainer made the significant finding after reviewing data from 1,455 participants in her long-running [Project EAT](#) (Eating and Activity in Teens and Young Adults), the largest and most comprehensive longitudinal body of research examining predictors of eating- and weight-related problems in [young people](#). The data came from four surveys that participants filled out every five years beginning in 1998 that inquired about their health, including the topics of this particular study: diet, physical activity, weight control habits, body satisfaction and weight status.

Key findings included:

- 78 percent of females in the first survey had at least one eating, activity or weight-related problem and 82 percent had similar markers in the fourth survey given 15 years later.
- 60 percent of males had at least one problem in the first survey, which grew to 69 percent in the fourth [survey](#).
- The most prevalent issue for both genders was unhealthy weight-control behaviors.
- Two-thirds of girls and one-third of boys always had one of these problems during their development to adulthood.
- A significant proportion of young people had three or more problems at one time.

"In general, we did not see a decrease in problems over time," said Neumark-Sztainer. "People often think some of these problems are part of being an adolescent, but we see that they persist into later life."

Neumark-Sztainer found that when multiple problems are present, health professionals will need to take a different approach to solving them. For example, obesity may have to be addressed along with body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight-control behaviors.

The study shows that helping young people develop healthy eating, activity, and body-satisfaction levels, and heal from whatever problems exist in these areas, requires comprehensive interventions that begin before kids enter adolescence and should continue through young adulthood.

"As a society, we need to accept that people come in different shapes and sizes, and we need to provide more opportunities for people to make [healthy food choices](#) and to be physically active," said Neumark-Sztainer.

Neumark-Sztainer plans to continue following the Project EAT group to examine how eating and [activity](#) patterns in adolescence influence adult [health](#) outcomes and parenting practices. She also wants to explore how to best work with high-risk populations, such as people living in chronic stress due to factors such as poverty, racism and weight discrimination.

More information: Dianne Neumark-Sztainer et al. Eating, Activity, and Weight-related Problems From Adolescence to Adulthood, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2018.04.032](#)

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