

Unhealthy weight-control practices can persist and intensify in adulthood

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As many as one-third of adolescents and two-thirds of adults engage in dieting. Unhealthy forms of weight control such as purging, fasting and dieting are linked to problems later in life including eating disorders,

depression and substance abuse.

A new study involving researchers and data from the University of Minnesota recently examined the prevalence of weight [control](#) behaviors across life stages and found that they often begin in adolescence and can persist—or even intensify—in adulthood.

The study, which was co-authored by School of Public Health Professor Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D., and led by Assistant Professor Ann Haynos, Ph.D., of the Psychiatry Department in the Medical School, was published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*.

Haynos and Neumark-Sztainer examined survey answers from 1,455 [adult men](#) and women who were asked about their dieting practices. The adults were selected from the School of Public Health's long-running [Project EAT](#), a multi-decade study tracking the health and well-being of thousands of participants beginning in adolescence.

The study found:

- The rates of dieting increase over time for both men and women.
- From young adulthood (age 25) into adulthood (age 31), rates of high-frequency dieting—five or more times a year—and extreme forms of weight control, such as purging and using diet pills, increased for men.
- For both genders, dieting and unhealthy weight control patterns initiated prior to [young adulthood](#) were more likely to persist than cease in adulthood.
- Approximately 20 percent of people reported initiating dieting in adulthood.
- Approximately 20 percent of women reported stopping unhealthy weight-control behaviors in adulthood.

"Our findings show that the use of unhealthy weight control behaviors is not limited to the period of adolescence, but these behaviors continue to have a high prevalence 15 years later," said Neumark-Sztainer.

"A lot of interventions and programs are geared toward younger people, so there's likely an unmet need for interventions aimed at stopping problematic weight control in adults," said Haynos.

Haynos is continuing her research and conducting a study to isolate and understand the [risk factors](#) for adults that can lead to unhealthy [weight control](#) practices. The data will be used to design interventions for those at highest risk for negative outcomes from the behaviors.

More information: Ann F. Haynos et al. Patterns of weight control behavior persisting beyond young adulthood: Results from a 15-year longitudinal study, *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/eat.22963](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22963)

Provided by University of Minnesota

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