

Intuitive eating during teenage years linked to better mental health and eating behaviors in adulthood

March 5 2020



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Some researchers suspect that encouraging people to practice intuitive eating, defined as consuming food based on feelings of hunger and fullness rather than following a restrictive diet, could lead to greater

psychological well-being. Researchers with the University of Minnesota School of Public Health (SPH) recently took a closer look at this relationship and found that people who ate intuitively as teens were less likely to experience depression, disordered eating, and other related issues as adults.

The study, published in the journal *Eating and Weight Disorders*, was co-authored by SPH Professor Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, and lead researcher Vivienne Hazzard from the Sanford Center for Biobehavioral Research. The research used data from Neumark-Sztainer's long-running [Project EAT](#), which is a study tracking the nutrition, activity and well-being of adolescents as they mature into adulthood.

"There is growing interest in the concept of intuitive eating with regard to what it looks like, who is doing it, and if it predicts better health-related behaviors and outcomes," said Neumark-Sztainer. "In response, we added questions on intuitive eating to our Project EAT surveys to learn more."

The data provided details on a group of nearly 1,500 adolescents who completed surveys in 2010 and then again in 2018 when they were young adults. Their average age was 14.5 years and 22.2 years, respectively. The group included white (19.7%), black (28.6%), Hispanic (17.1%), Asian (19.5%) and other (15.1%) racial/[ethnic groups](#).

To measure intuitive eating, the surveys included questions assessing the extent to which respondents use internal/physical cues to guide how much they eat. The questions explored if respondents:

- stop eating when they feel full;
- trust their body to tell them how much to eat;
- eat everything on their plate even if they're not hungry.

The study found:

- teens who initially scored higher in intuitive eating and those who became more intuitive eaters over the course of the study were found to experience less [depressive symptoms](#), [low self-esteem](#), body dissatisfaction, unhealthy or extreme weight control behaviors, and binge eating in adulthood;
- [high scores](#) for intuitive eating were found to protect most strongly against binge eating, reducing the odds of doing so by up to 74%.

"The fact that these results came from such a diverse sample suggests that the benefits of intuitive eating seem to cut across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines," said Hazzard.

Hazzard said that if future studies continue to show that intuitive eating is linked to positive health outcomes, a logical next step may be to include it within children's nutrition education programs in schools.

More information: Vivienne M. Hazzard et al. Intuitive eating longitudinally predicts better psychological health and lower use of disordered eating behaviors: findings from EAT 2010–2018, *Eating and Weight Disorders - Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity* (2020).

[DOI: 10.1007/s40519-020-00852-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-020-00852-4)

Provided by University of Minnesota

Citation: Intuitive eating during teenage years linked to better mental health and eating behaviors in adulthood (2020, March 5) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-intuitive-teenage-years-linked-mental.html>

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