

Binge drinkers beware, drunkorexia is calling

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Mojito, appletini or a simple glass of fizz—they may take the edge off a busy day, but if you find yourself bingeing on more than a few, you could be putting your physical and mental health at risk according new research at the University of South Australia.

Examining the drinking patterns of 479 female Australian university students aged 18–24 years, the world-first empirical study explored the underlying belief patterns that can contribute to Drunkorexia—a damaging and dangerous behavior where disordered patterns of eating are used to offset negative effects of consuming excess alcohol, such as gaining weight.

Concerningly, researchers found that a staggering 82.7 percent of female university students surveyed had engaged in drunkorexic behaviors over the past three months. And, more than 28 percent were regularly and purposely skipping meals, consuming low-calorie or sugar-free alcoholic beverages, purging or exercising after drinking to help reduce ingested calories from alcohol, at least 25 percent of the time.

Clinical psychologist and lead UniSA researcher Alycia Powell-Jones says the prevalence of drunkorexic behaviors among Australian female university students is concerning.

"Due to their age and stage of development, [young adults](#) are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors, which can include drinking excess alcohol," Powell-Jones says.

"Excess alcohol consumption combined with restrictive and disordered eating patterns is extremely dangerous and can dramatically increase the risk of developing serious physical and psychological consequences, including hypoglycaemia, liver cirrhosis, nutritional deficits, brain and heart damage, memory lapses, blackouts, depression and cognitive deficits.

"Certainly, many of us have drunk too much alcohol at some point in time, and we know just by how we feel the next day, that this is not good for us, but when nearly a third of young female uni students are intentionally cutting back on food purely to offset alcohol calories; it's a

serious health concern."

The harmful use of alcohol is a global issue, with excess consumption causing millions of deaths, including many thousands of young lives.

In Australia, one in six people consume alcohol at dangerous levels, placing them at lifetime risk of an alcohol-related disease or injury. The combination of excessive alcohol intake with restrictive eating behaviors to offset calories can result in a highly toxic cocktail for this population.

The study was undertaken in two stages. The first measured the prevalence of self-reported, compensative and restrictive activities in relation to their alcohol consumption.

The second stage identified participants' Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMS) – or thought patterns—finding that that the subset of schemas most predictive of Drunkorexia were 'insufficient self-control,' 'emotional deprivation' and '[social isolation](#)."

Powell-Jones says identifying the early maladaptive schemas linked to Drunkorexia is key to understanding the harmful condition.

These are deeply held and pervasive themes regarding oneself and one's relationship with others, that can develop in childhood and then can influence all areas of life, often in dysfunctional ways. Early maladaptive schemas can also be influenced by cultural and social norms.

drunkorexic behavior appears to be motivated by two key social norms for young adults—consuming [alcohol](#) and thinness.

"This study has provided preliminary insight into better understanding why young female adults make these decisions to engage in drunkorexic behaviors," Powell-Jones says.

"Not only may it be a coping strategy to manage social anxieties through becoming accepted and fitting in with peer group or cultural expectations, but it also shows a reliance on avoidant coping strategies.

"It is important that clinicians, educators, parents and friends are aware of the factors that motivate young women to engage in this harmful and dangerous behavior, including cultural norms, beliefs that drive self-worth, a sense of belonging, and interpersonal connectedness.

"By being connected, researchers and clinicians can develop appropriate clinical interventions and support for vulnerable young people within the youth mental health sector."

More information: Alycia Powell-Jones et al, Drunkorexia: An investigation of symptomatology and early maladaptive schemas within a female, young adult Australian population, *Australian Psychologist* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/ap.12462](https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12462)

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