

'Cheat meals' linked to eating disorders in adolescents and young adults

August 16 2022



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A new study published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* found that, in course of a year, over half of men, women, and transgender or gender non-conforming participants engaged in at least one "cheat meal"—the

practice of deviating from one's established dietary practices to consume "prohibited" calorie dense meals, only to return to previous dietary practices later.

Among [women](#), engagement in cheat meals in the previous 12 months was associated with all seven types of eating disorder behaviors. Among men it was associated with binge-eating, compulsive exercise, and fasting behaviors. Finally, among transgender or gender non-conforming participants, it was associated with overeating and binge-eating behaviors.

"Research hasn't fully explored eating behaviors purported to increase muscularity and leanness, such as cheat meals," says lead author Kyle T. Ganson, Ph.D., MSW, assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. "This is particularly important given the popularity of cheat meals that is well documented on social media. We needed to explore whether there are associations between cheat meals and eating disorder psychopathology."

Ganson and his colleagues analyzed a national sample of over 2,700 adolescents and [young adults](#) from the 2021-2022 Canadian Study of Adolescent Health Behaviors.

Their findings also revealed that engagement in cheat meals was highest among men.

"Cheat meals have been conceptualized and promoted within men's muscle-building and fitness communities. As a result, men in this study may be strategically using cheat meals to catalyze muscle growth," says Ganson. "Similarly, among women, the use of cheat meals may be used to prevent or curtail binge-eating episodes or alleviate cravings for restricted foods."

While cheat meals consisted of calorie dense foods across the entire sample, significant differences were found between the types of cheat meals consumed by men and women. Specifically, men reported consuming foods higher in protein, whereas women consumed dairy, salty, and sweet foods.

"Clinical professionals should be aware of the common occurrence of cheat meals among adolescents and young adults and the sanctioned nature of these behaviors in fitness communities and on [social media](#)," says Ganson. "Future research should continue to conceptualize these types of eating behaviors and their implications for [public health](#)."

More information: Kyle T. Ganson et al, Characterizing cheat meals among a national sample of Canadian adolescents and young adults, *Journal of Eating Disorders* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s40337-022-00642-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-022-00642-6)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: 'Cheat meals' linked to eating disorders in adolescents and young adults (2022, August 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-08-meals-linked-disorders-adolescents-young.html>

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