

# Individuals experiencing food insecurity likely to binge eat when food is available

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Young adults experiencing food insecurity may be prone to binge eating in times when food is available, according to a new study from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health (SPH).

SPH researchers found support for the "feast or famine" cycle hypothesis in food-insecure households. Findings from their study are consistent with the idea that fluctuating levels of food availability throughout the month may lead people to restrict their [food intake](#) out of necessity when food is scarce, and then compensate by overeating when food is more plentiful. Binge eating is a behavior linked with a number of adverse physical and mental health consequences, including type 2 diabetes and depression.

The study, co-authored by Vivienne Hazzard, a post-doctoral associate in SPH, and published in *Appetite*, surveyed 75 [young adults](#) living in food-insecure households several times each day over a two-week period to investigate how momentary levels of food security related to binge-eating symptoms later in the day. The researchers found:

- Significantly more binge-eating symptoms occurred in the hours following instances of increased food security among young adults.
- This link only existed for young adults using food assistance programs, not for those who did not report using food assistance.

The researchers suggest rethinking the timing of benefits distribution in food assistance programs. Hazzard noted that the way food assistance programs are currently structured may inadvertently exacerbate the "feast-or-famine" cycle.

"Policymakers should consider how they could provide more stable and consistent access to adequate food," said Hazzard. "While programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) are critical to improving [food security](#) in the U.S., some have called for a restructuring of their benefit distribution schedules. Currently, these programs distribute benefits only once a month. Our study adds to a growing body of evidence that suggests more

frequent distribution of benefits may be warranted."

Additional research in this area should test whether intervening to promote more stable food access can interrupt that cycle and reduce [binge eating](#).

**More information:** Vivienne M. Hazzard et al, Relative food abundance predicts greater binge-eating symptoms in subsequent hours among young adults experiencing food insecurity: Support for the "feast-or-famine" cycle hypothesis from an ecological momentary assessment study, *Appetite* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2022.106316](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2022.106316)

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