

# Loneliness associated with unhealthy diets and physical inactivity among US college students

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With data from the Mason: Health Starts Here study, researchers found that students reporting a higher level of loneliness also reported a higher

level of sedentary behavior and low activity.

Transitioning to a new environment, as many college freshman do, can increase feelings of loneliness, and feelings of loneliness in [college students](#) have dramatically increased in the last decade, according to the National College Health Assessment. Additionally, a [2021 survey](#) reported that 44% of U.S. college [students](#) described their weight as more than normal, i.e. either in the overweight or obese category. Though loneliness has been linked to unhealthy weight and physical inactivity, there is a lack of research on dietary behaviors in college students and the role it can play in obesity in college students.

With data from the Mason: Health Starts Here [cohort study](#), Master of Nutrition alum Li Jiang found that loneliness was related to altered diet quality and [physical inactivity](#). The research was done as part of Jiang's master's thesis, and Mason Nutrition and Food Studies Department Chair Lawrence J. Cheskin, Associate Professor Lilian de Jonge, former faculty member Cara Frankenfeld, and former postdoctoral fellow Ziaul H. Rana also contributed to the project.

"Our study supports a potential need for further research in understanding unhealthy dietary behavior and [physical activity](#) which may be related to loneliness, an emotion that impacts many college students," says Jiang.

Sedentary (19.2%) and low active (53.8%) behaviors were more frequent in students reporting high loneliness (score ranges of 4–6 and 7–9) than those reporting low loneliness (score of 10-12). Students reporting more loneliness had higher fat diets than students reporting less loneliness.

"Interventions to reduce loneliness may have a positive effect on [health promotion](#) in this population. This data go along with other initial

findings from the Health Starts Here study that college students are not meeting healthy dietary guidelines or getting enough physical activity," said Cheskin, who has an MD.

The study is a cross-sectional study that analyzed baseline [data](#) collected in the first wave of Mason: Health Start Here in 2019, and was funded by George Mason University's Institute for BioHealth Innovation.

["Loneliness is associated with unhealthful dietary behaviors and physical inactivity among US college students"](#) was published in November 2022 in the *Journal of American College Health*.

[Mason: Health Starts Here](#) is a first-of-its-kind transdisciplinary [student cohort study](#) to understand and improve the health and well-being of university students. This research will follow a broad sample of young adults, specifically Mason students, over time to capture the diversity of their experiences in college and how it affects their health and well-being.

**More information:** Li Jiang et al, Loneliness is associated with unhealthful dietary behaviors and physical inactivity among US college students, *Journal of American College Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/07448481.2022.2141060](#)

Provided by George Mason University

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