

How emotions influence what adolescents eat

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A new study by the Leibniz Institute for Prevention Research and Epidemiology—BIPS has investigated how emotional states influence the eating habits of children and adolescents and which interventions help to change unhealthy eating habits. The research focuses on the role of stress and impulsivity in food choices, particularly in relation to sweet and fatty foods. It has now been [published](#) in the *International Journal of*

Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity.

"Our study shows that [emotional states](#), especially negative stress, have a significant influence on dietary choices in adolescents," explains Stefanie Do, scientist at BIPS and first author of the publication. "This finding can help to develop effective interventions aimed at changing unhealthy dietary patterns."

To investigate the relationship between emotions, impulsivity and a preference for sweet and fatty foods, Do's team analyzed data from the European IDEFICS/I.Family cohort.

A large-scale multicenter study in eight European countries (Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Sweden), which investigated the effects of health-related behaviors on obesity and [metabolic disorders](#) in children and adolescents.

The survey began in 2007 with 16,230 children aged two to nine years and was continued in further waves until 2021. In the current study, Do's team hypothetically placed all adolescents on a high well-being or low impulsivity score and compared them with the low and [high scores](#) to estimate the effects on the propensity to eat sweet and fatty foods.

"The consumption of unhealthy foods, such as sweet or fatty foods, in response to negative emotions is an often unregulated strategy of our body to deal with [negative emotions](#), such as fear, anger, frustration, stress or sadness," explains PD Dr. Antje Hebestreit, head of the Lifestyle-Related Disorders Unit at BIPS.

"Comparing the effects of well-being and impulsivity on the tendency to eat unhealthy foods, our analyses suggest that impulsivity may have a stronger effect. This underlines the importance of measures that reduce emotion-driven impulsivity. Sport, for example, could help in this

regard."

Adolescents suffering from chronic stress are prone to impulsive behavior and are therefore highly susceptible to the increasing availability and advertising of unhealthy foods such as sweets or potato chips.

The results of the study are particularly relevant given the strong presence and marketing of unhealthy foods in Europe. Adolescence is a time when young people are learning strategies to cope better with stress.

This age group is therefore particularly suitable for appropriate preventative measures. If a person learns unhealthy behaviors during this phase, they usually remain for life. Further research into effective interventions is therefore very important, according to the team in their paper.

More information: Stefanie Do et al, The role of psychosocial well-being and emotion-driven impulsiveness in food choices of European adolescents, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s12966-023-01551-w](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-023-01551-w)

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