

# New study identifies risk factors of disordered eating in overweight youth

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University of Minnesota Project Eating Among Teens (EAT) researchers have identified factors that may increase overweight adolescents' risk of engaging in extreme weight control behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, the use of diet pills, laxatives, and diuretics, as well as binge eating. Overweight youth with certain socio-environmental, psychological, and behavioral tendencies, such as reading magazine articles about dieting, reporting a lack of family connectedness, placing a high importance on weight, and reporting having participated in unhealthy weight control behaviors, are more likely to suffer from eating disorders.

Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D., M.P.H., R.D., School of Public Health, and colleagues used data from Project EAT, an ongoing study that assessed eating and weight-related behaviors in 4,746 adolescents from 31 urban Minneapolis-St. Paul schools during the 1998-99 academic year. Youth were surveyed at two time points; the first occurring when participants were in middle school and high school, and the second occurring five years later.

Researchers found that disordered eating habits among overweight youth are linked to specific tendencies for both males and females, but a number of specific differences between genders were noticed. For example, increased hours of moderate to extreme physical activity and lower self-esteem predicted higher risk for disordered eating among females. For males, [depressive symptoms](#), poor eating patterns, including high fast food and sweetened beverage intake, increased their risk of disordered eating. These findings link different patterns of behaviors and different potential motivators for overweight male and female adolescents to developing eating disorders.

"Further exploration of these gender differences may be important in understanding who is at highest risk for developing disordered eating

behaviors and whether different intervention strategies may be needed to prevent disordered eating among males and females," said Nancy Sherwood, Ph.D., assistant professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and a co-author of the study.

Findings from this study also suggest the importance of strong family relationships for overweight adolescents. These youth face pressures above and beyond those faced by their non-overweight peers due to strong social pressures to be thin. Lack of family connectedness, including not eating family meals together, was found to increase the risk of disordered eating behaviors in both young males and females.

While an important public health priority is to prevent obesity, it is also important to prevent the use of disordered eating behaviors among overweight adolescents. Findings from this study indicate the importance of working with overweight youth to prevent an unhealthy preoccupation with weight, promote a positive psychological well-being, avoid unhealthy weight control behaviors, and encourage family connectedness.

Source: University of Minnesota ([news](#) : [web](#))

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