

Sexual minority youth have higher rates of disordered eating behaviors

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Sexual minority boys and girls are more likely to purge or take laxatives, use diet pills, or fast to lose weight than their straight peers, and those disordered eating trends may not be improving, according to new research from the University of British Columbia.

The study, which analyzed data from youth ages 12 to 18, found disparities in the rate of these behaviours between sexual minority teens and heterosexual youth. Although disordered eating behaviours appear to be declining for straight teens, the gap between them and sexual minority teens remains. For lesbian and bisexual girls, the gap appears to be widening.

"While it's promising to see improvements in the rate of disordered eating behaviours among heterosexual youth, we cannot say there has been any definite reduction of these behaviours for sexual minority youth," said Ryan Watson, the study's lead author and a postdoctoral research fellow in UBC's Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre in the School of Nursing. "For lesbian and bisexual girls, the rate of disordered eating behaviours is actually increasing, which is alarming."

Disordered eating behaviours refer to unhealthy eating habits that have not been diagnosed by a physician as an eating disorder, although they are still serious and have the potential to be harmful.

Researchers analyzed data gathered from surveys administered every two

years at public high schools in Massachusetts between 1999 and 2013. Students were asked about their sexual orientation, whether they used diet pills, refrained from eating for 24 hours or more, or vomited or took laxatives to lose or keep from gaining weight in the last month.

The researchers found that, in 2013, lesbians were twice as likely to report purging and fasting for weight control than they were in 1999. For bisexual girls, the prevalence of purging (33 per cent) was higher than for lesbians (22 per cent) in 1999, but it stayed nearly the same in 2013 (30 per cent), while it increased for lesbian girls (36 per cent). In contrast, among heterosexual girls, eight per cent reported purging in 1999, which declined to five per cent by 2013. Heterosexual boys had the lowest rates of these behaviours, and they declined even further over the years.

UBC nursing professor Elizabeth Saewyc, the study's senior author, said the findings suggest that the factors that put lesbian, gay and bisexual youth at higher risk for eating disorders have not improved.

"The factors that lead to disordered eating behaviours are complex," said Saewyc. "This study suggests that we need to figure out how to better support sexual minority youth, especially lesbian and bisexual girls, in developing positive body image and healthy eating choices."

The study, which was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, was published online this week in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*.

More information: Ryan J. Watson et al, Trends and disparities in disordered eating among heterosexual and sexual minority adolescents, *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/eat.22576](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22576)

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