

# College teens shun exercise and healthy food, study finds

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Older teenagers may be setting a course for lifelong obesity through inactivity and poor diets, according to a new study.

Scientists at the University of Reading say the findings add to the growing evidence showing radical changes are needed to influence the [health](#) and diet of children and teenagers, as the UK government launches a new nationwide strategy to tackle obesity.

The research, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, found that among 400 randomly-selected [college students](#) from two FE institutions in southern England, more than 90% said that they failed to meet nationally recommended exercise targets, with three in ten not doing any exercise at all.

The survey was conducted by researchers at the University of Reading in partnership with further education colleges in Farnborough and Kent, and took a random sample of students to look at various factors associated with health and obesity.

Lead researcher Sunbal Naureen Bhatti from the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Reading said:

"This paper provides a picture of what 16- to 18-year-olds are choosing to do with their health at a key transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. This is an important stage in life, as patterns of behavior may become normalized, leading to obesity in later life.

"Although only one in five participants had a BMI that classified them as obese, we see several concerning factors that may lead to longer term obesity. In particular, very few participants said that they were engaging in anything close to the recommended amount of exercise, and only one in five were eating the recommended 'five a day' intake of fruit and veg."

The study also shows how gender norms may be influencing participation in exercise and attitudes towards exercise at a formative time.

Only 7% of female students surveyed said that they were meeting the guidelines on exercise, and 64% said that they were "unfit." Meanwhile, 55% of males surveyed said that they were fit, but nearly a quarter did no exercise at all, with 86% failing to meet recommended guidelines.

Bhatti said, "Taken together, the behaviors that we see in this sample of college students is something that we should be concerned about. The vast majority of participants cited 'no time' or 'don't want to' when asked why they didn't meet exercise targets, and yet we saw a strong association between lack of [exercise](#) and engaging in screen time either computing, gaming, or watching TV. We recognize that this is a small study carried out in only two colleges, but we think there are important wider lessons here for [public health](#), particularly as the UK government launches its new strategy to tackle obesity. To successfully make long-term

efforts to tackle [obesity](#) in the UK, we must consider this age group as critical, when young people are beginning to exert more independence over their lifestyle."

**More information:** Sunbal N. Bhatti et al.  
Recognition of 16–18-Year-Old Adolescents for Guiding Physical Activity Interventions: A Cross-Sectional Study, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2020).  
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