STAT Reporting from the frontiers of health and medicine

Forty Percent of High School Students Report Binge Eating In New CDC Survey

The data also show binge eating is more prevalent among young people of color



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About 40% of high school students reported binge eating in the past month in a large new government survey, putting a spotlight on how widespread this common form of disordered eating is among young people in the U.S.

This is the first time the biennial survey, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has asked about binge eating, and the first data on disordered eating collected by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in a decade. Among its other striking findings: 17% of nearly 7,000 students said they had engaged in binge eating within the last three days. "It was extremely alarming seeing how high those numbers were," said Ariel Beccia, a researcher in the adolescent and children's medicine division of Boston Children's Hospital.

Binge eating was more prevalent among female than male students (19% versus 16%). It was also more common among Black (19%), Hispanic (20%), and multiracial (20%) students compared to white (15%) and Middle Eastern or North African students (10%).

The finding that young people of color are largely more likely to report binge eating is important because it counters longstanding stereotypes that eating disorders and disordered eating primarily affect white girls and young women, said Beccia.

Eating disorders not only affect everyone, "they affect marginalized youth more, actually," Beccia said.

The survey also found links between binge eating and frequent social media use (checking platforms at least hourly), poor mental health, and suicidality.

The survey question defined binge eating as eating with a loss of control: "During the past 30 days, on how many days did you eat an unusually large amount of food in a short period of time and experience a loss of control over how much you were eating or a feeling that you could not stop eating even when full?" Including it in the survey was the culmination of a decadelong battle to get more data by groups that research and advocate for people with eating disorders.

Questions on disordered eating were eliminated from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey back in 2015 in order to make room for queries about behaviors like vaping, which was then on the rise among youth. There's only so much space in the survey because it's designed to be completed within a 45-minute classroom period, Beccia said.

For the 2025 survey, the coalition of eating disorder advocacy and research groups pushed for a question about binge eating because prior research had shown it was the most pervasive form of disordered eating among youth. In addition, young people experiencing food insecurity and other kinds of economic strain are also "more likely than their more advantaged peers to engage in binge eating," Beccia said, "and so we really wanted to prioritize the ability to look at these inequities."

Going forward, the groups would also like to include a question about other restrictive behaviors like fasting, dieting, and purging. That item is currently part of an optional question bank that state and local governments can choose to include when crafting their own surveys.

The prevalence of binge eating also raises questions about Americans' ultra-processed food environment, according to Lindsey Smith-Taillie, a nutrition epidemiologist at UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. "Many of these foods are engineered for overconsumption — for example, they often contain flavor bursts that rapidly dissipate and/or rapidly absorbed carbohydrates, which leave us wanting more," she said via email. "But beyond the foods themselves, the fact that they are cheap, shelf-stable, convenient, and heavily marketed means that we can keep them in our homes in abundance."

Ultra-processed food and addiction researcher Ashley Gearhardt, who co-authored two recent papers on the subject, noted that binge eating emerged as a recognized clinical problem at the same time highly processed foods were becoming dominant in the food supply. But she also said that doesn't establish causation. Fundamentally, Beccia said, disordered eating is a mental health issue.

"Eating disorders are so underfunded and under-studied, in part because we did not have these kinds of epidemiologic data," said Beccia. She's hopeful that the results pointing to widespread disordered eating can help convince funders that "this is a true public health issue that we need resources directed to, in order to study and address them."