



The Relationship Between Intuitive Eating and Health Indicators Among College Women

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ABSTRACT

Epidemic levels of obesity represent a growing public health problem associated with a variety of negative health outcomes. Population level interventions that aim to moderate obesigenic environments have been proposed but remain largely unimplemented. Standard individual level interventions that focus on dietary restraint have been ineffective and in some cases harmful. Intuitive eating, an anti-dieting strategy that relies on recognizing and responding to internal hunger and satiation cues, has been proposed as an alternative approach to healthy weight management at the individual level—but it remains largely untested. This study evaluated the relationship between intuitive eating and various health indicators among female college students. As measured by the Intuitive Eating Scale (IES), it was found that intuitive eating was significantly correlated with lower body mass index ($r = -.576$), lower triglyceride levels ($r = -.408$), higher levels of high density lipoproteins (.437), and improved cardiovascular risk ($r = .425$). Findings provide tentative support for intuitive eating as a positive approach to healthy weight management at the individual level. Implications and future research needs are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 65% of American adults are currently overweight based on a body mass index (BMI) of 25-29 kg/m², and over 30% of American adults are considered obese (BMI \geq 30 kg/m²). The prevalence of obesity has increased so rapidly in the U.S. over the past two decades that it generally is referred to as an epidemic.¹ With obesity being linked to heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic diseases, serious public health implications emerge.² In an effort to control this epidemic, health professionals have developed strategies at both the population and individual levels.³⁻⁵

Suggested strategies for managing obesity at the population level are similar to those that have been used to target the tobacco industry. Taxes on nutritionally

empty, high-fat foods, as well as a moratorium on the advertisement of junk foods to children, form the basis of environmental control strategies—although these approaches have had limited application to date.⁵ While such public health efforts will be important for managing obesity at the population level in the future,³ they currently offer little direction for the overweight individual.

Efforts at the individual level typically focus on dietary restraint and exercise with the goal of expending more calories than one consumes.^{6,7} However, this strategy has had disappointing results since the level of restrained eating and exercise necessary to achieve weight loss seems unsustainable for most people given the current obesigenic environment.⁸ Even more wor-

risome is the finding that dietary restraint may paradoxically be predictive of obesity among some groups.⁹

As an alternative to restrictive dieting and its potentially negative outcomes, an

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