



The Relationship Between Intuitive Eating and Health Indicators Among College Women

Steven Hawks, Hala Madanat, Jaylyn Hawks, and Ashley Harris

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

Steven Hawks, EdD, MBA, CHES is Associate Professor, Department of Health Science, Brigham Young University, 229L Richards Building, Provo, UT 84602; E-mail: steve_hawks@byu.edu. Hala N. Madanat, is with the Department of Health Science, Brigham Young University, 221 Richards Building, Provo, UT 84602. Jaylyn F. Hawks, is with the Department of Sociology, Brigham Young University, 800 SWKT, Provo, UT 84602. Ashley D. Harris, BS, is with the Department of Health Science, Brigham Young University, 221 Richards Building, Provo, UT 84602.



anti-dieting movement began to take shape in the 1980s and has continued to gain empirical support.¹⁰ This movement is based on the assertion that restrained dieting (i.e., controlled meal plans, avoidance of taboo foods, and/or restricted intake of fat grams or calories) is not sustainable and may contribute to such negative outcomes as weight recycling, altered body composition, heightened fat storage potential, decreased resting metabolism, dysfunctional relationships with food, increased risk of eating disorders, low self-esteem, and an overall sense of failure among dieters.¹¹⁻¹³ Proponents of the anti-dieting movement further argued that many individuals seem to be capable of achieving a healthy body weight while maintaining an unrestrained relationship with food.¹⁴ Informal assessments revealed that for these individuals food intake was based primarily on physical hunger cues, rather than on diet plans, environmental cues, emotional states, or other external factors.^{15,16} Such individuals came to be referred to as intuitive eaters, and intuitive eating has continued to grow in popularity as an alternative to restrictive dieting.^{17,18}

In short, the concept of intuitive eating suggests that all individuals have within themselves a natural mechanism that if allowed to function will ensure good nutrition at a healthy weight.¹⁴ As individuals get in touch with this "inner guide" or access their "inner wisdom" they will be more in tune with their bodies' physical needs and will eat in a way that supports healthy weight maintenance and positive nutrition. At the same time they will avoid overeating, obsessive food consumption, harmful dieting, or mindless nibbling.¹⁷

This concept of intuitive eating has come to include several key attributes.^{14-17,19} The first is the ability to clearly recognize the physical signs of hunger, satisfaction, and fullness. Second, the intuitive eater is capable of sensing the nutritional needs of the body. Since there are no taboo foods or restrictions on eating, the intuitive eater considers the full range of food possibilities and carefully weighs available choices against

physical promptings. Third, for the intuitive eater, the physical effects of food consumption are carefully monitored in terms of satisfaction. Food is not consumed unconsciously while driving or watching television, but is instead fully appreciated as it satisfies the nutritional and hunger needs of the body. Fourth, as promoted in the self-help literature, intuitive eating has taken on a philosophical orientation that values the health and energy of the body more highly than the fashionable rewards of an attractive appearance. Theoretically, an intuitive eater is more likely to be concerned about the functional benefits of fitness and proper diet composition, rather than the social advantages of a lean figure. Finally, the intuitive eating philosophy strongly continues to reject restrictive dieting as a means of weight control, but instead commits individuals to mastering the elements of intuitive eating in an open, unrestrained relationship with food that promotes healthy weight management and positive self-esteem.²⁰ All of these attributes taken together lead to the proposition that intuitive eaters are more likely to be a healthy weight and have other positive health indicators.

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

For managing body weight and food issues at the individual level, the principles of intuitive eating are being advocated increasingly in a variety of health settings, especially in the treatment of eating disorders.²¹ Yet there is little empirical evidence that the assumptions of intuitive eating are legitimate. The primary assumption, that adherence to intuitive eating principles is associated with positive health indicators, seems especially important to investigate before intuitive eating can be promoted as a positive approach to healthy weight management. The purpose of this pilot study was to evaluate the relationship between intuitive eating and several health indicators among female college students. Results of this study will be helpful in establishing the usefulness of intuitive eating as a potential health promotion tool for addressing the obesity epidemic at the individual level.

METHODS

Sample

The target population for this study was female college students with the sample being drawn from coeds enrolled in a required general education course at a regional western university. Since issues with body size, dieting, and eating disorders are disproportionately present among women only females were selected for this study.²² Even though selection of the participants was not strictly random, it was felt that participants accurately represented females within this university population given the general education requirement that all students take the selected course. Participation in the survey was voluntary, no rewards were given for participating, and no penalties were administered for refusal to take part. The study was approved prior to data collection by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Instrument

The Intuitive Eating Scale (IES) was administered in paper/pencil format to the female students in the class to obtain the high and low intuitive eating groups mentioned above. The IES has been evaluated previously among college females in the U.S. and found to be valid and reliable.²³ Original factor analysis of the IES isolated four factors that replicated scale construction, including: intrinsic eating, extrinsic eating, anti-dieting, and self-care. Alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged from .42 to .93 indicating moderate to high levels of internal consistency, and retesting after four weeks yielded adequate reliability coefficients ranging from .56 to .87.

Higher scores on each of the four subscales, as well as a higher total score, indicate adherence to intuitive eating principles. Intrinsic eating measures an orientation to eating that is internally driven by the primary desire to satisfy hunger and nutritional needs. Extrinsic eating measures the degree to which eating is influenced by external factors such as social situations, environmental cues, or emotional states. Anti-dieting represents an aversion to diet

