



Facts on Eating Disorders and Exercise

September 1997

The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls

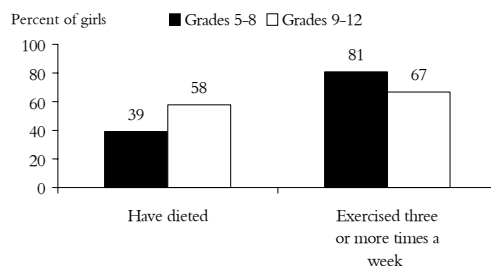
Regular exercise and well-balanced eating patterns are known to promote health and a sense of well-being. Learned early, these habits can provide a solid foundation for a healthy life. *The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls*, however, discovered that many adolescent girls neglect to exercise and a surprising number appear to have eating disorders.

The girls' responses revealed that as they mature and become more concerned about their appearance, they often develop a negative self-image. Barely half (53 percent) of the high school girls surveyed thought they were the right weight, and one-third believed they were too heavy—a dramatic increase from 21 percent for younger girls, and twice the rate for boys who believe they are overweight.

DIETING VERSUS EXERCISE

A majority of girls turns to dieting rather than exercise to control weight. The survey found that more than half (58 percent) of high school girls had dieted, and one in four said she regularly counts calories. At the same time, older girls were less likely to exercise frequently than older boys or younger girls. While 81 percent of younger girls said they exercised at least three times a week, only two in three older girls (67 percent) did so. Older girls were also less likely to participate in group exercise outside

Girls diet more and exercise less as they mature.



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Louis Harris and Associates, Inc.

of gym class (20 percent vs. 34 percent of younger girls), and slightly less likely to participate in organized sports (40 percent vs. 43 percent of younger girls).

ABUSED GIRLS AT HIGH RISK OF EATING DISORDERS

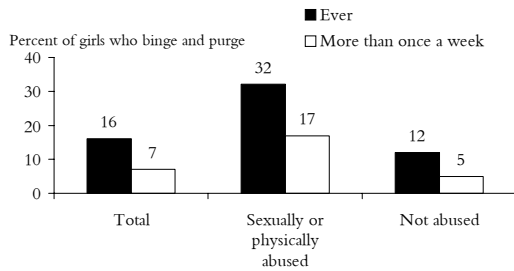
Self-reports of bingeing and purging indicate that a significant proportion of the girls surveyed may be affected by eating disorders. Nearly one in five girls in grades nine through twelve (18 percent) said she had binged and purged, as did 13 percent of younger girls. Older girls were more than twice as likely as older boys to binge and purge; younger girls and boys reported similar rates (13 percent vs. 10 percent).

Girls who binge and purge do so with alarming frequency. Of those who said they had binged and purged, 36 percent of younger girls and 30 percent of older girls said they did so at least once a day, and 11 percent of younger and 15 percent of older girls did so a few times a week. Of all high school girls, 8 percent indicated they were bingeing and purging more than once a week.

The survey found that girls reporting either sexual or physical abuse were at high risk for developing eating disorders: they were almost three times as likely to binge and purge as those who said they had not been abused (32 percent vs. 12 percent). Abused girls were also likely to binge and purge frequently: one in six abused girls said she did so more than once per week; 13 percent said they did so at least daily.

This high rate of bingeing and purging is likely influenced by the negative self-image of many abused girls. The survey found that two in five abused girls thought they were overweight, almost twice the rate of nonabused girls. Abused girls also turned to dieting more often than nonabused girls to control weight (68 percent vs. 44 percent).

Abused girls have higher rates of bingeing and purging.



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MENTAL HEALTH, EATING, AND EXERCISE

Girls with depressive symptoms often have a low self-image and engage in destructive eating patterns. The survey found that nearly one in three girls (30 percent) with depressive symptoms had binged and purged, compared with 11 percent of those with few or no symptoms. Those with poor mental health were also far more likely to have been on a diet, and 47 percent of girls with depressive symptoms and 57 percent of girls with low self-confidence perceived themselves as overweight.

Self-confidence was also found to be closely related to eating and exercise habits. The survey found that girls with low self-confidence dieted at nearly double the rate of girls with high self-confidence (71 percent vs. 39 percent) and were four times as likely to binge and purge (33 percent vs. 8 percent). They were also less likely to exercise every day (46 percent vs. 62 percent of girls with high self-confidence).

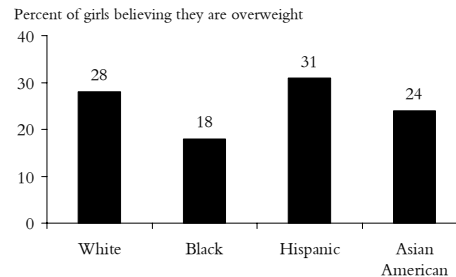
The survey also found that many girls are likely to take multiple risks with their health. Among those who smoke or drink frequently, one-third (35 percent of smokers and 30 percent of drinkers) said they had binged and purged. Similarly, among girls who had used drugs in the past month, 34 percent said they had binged and purged. More than half of girls who smoke, drink, use drugs, binge and purge, or don't exercise, are also engaged in at least one other risky behavior.

RATES VARY BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

Eating behaviors and self-perceptions of weight varied significantly across racial and ethnic groups. The survey found that white, Hispanic, and Asian American girls were more likely than black girls to

believe they were overweight. Dieting was also more prevalent among white, Hispanic, and Asian American than black girls: 52 percent of white girls, 46 percent of Hispanic girls, 45 percent of Asian American girls, and 38 percent of black girls had been on a diet.

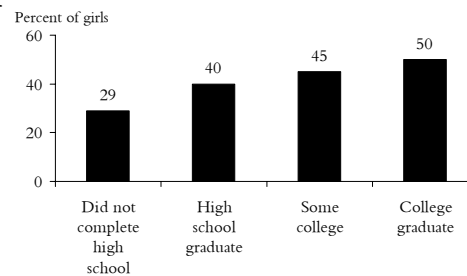
Girls' perceptions of being overweight vary with race and ethnicity.



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Rates also varied by socioeconomic status (as measured by mother's education). Girls whose mothers had less than a high school education were almost twice as likely to say they had binged and purged as those with college-educated mothers (23 percent vs. 13 percent) and were more likely to see themselves as overweight (35 percent vs. 24 percent). Girls with less-educated mothers were also markedly less likely to exercise at least three times a week than girls with college-educated mothers (65 percent vs. 79 percent) or to participate in organized sports (29 percent vs. 50 percent).

Girls whose mothers have less education are less likely to participate in organized sports.



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The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls, conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., from December 1996 through June 1997, consisted of in-class questionnaires completed by 6,748 adolescents—3,586 girls and 3,162 boys—in grades five through twelve. The classroom sample included a nationally representative cross-section of schools, with 265 public, private, and parochial schools participating.