

Prevalence and correlates of dieting in college women: a cross sectional study

Flavia Fayet¹
Peter Petocz²
Samir Samman¹

¹Discipline of Nutrition and Metabolism, School of Molecular Bioscience, University of Sydney,
²Department of Statistics, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Background: Dieting is a common practice among young women, irrespective of age, race, ethnicity, and weight. We aimed to determine the prevalence of dieting and its relationship with eating behavior, body weight, and body mass index (BMI) in college women.

Methods: This was a cross-sectional survey of female students aged 18–35 years (n = 308). Measures included BMI, restraint, disinhibition, hunger, dieting, weight loss, and perceived weight.

Results: A high percentage of college females consider themselves overweight or obese, despite having a BMI in the normal range. Dieting was practised by 43%, and 32% were avoiding weight gain, despite 78% having a healthy BMI. Women classified themselves as overweight or obese (27%), while only 11% were actually in these categories. Exercise was a common method of weight loss and positive associations were observed between dieting and BMI. Assessment of eating behavior showed that 27% were classified as high-restraint. Restraint and disinhibition were positively correlated with BMI.

Conclusion: Despite the widespread availability of nutrition information, there is incongruity in measured and perceived BMI in young educated women. Dieting practices and BMI are associated with restraint and disinhibition. Nutrition professionals should consider educating college women about healthy body weight regardless of their clients' BMI.

Keywords: body mass index, college women, dieting, eating behavior

Introduction

Dieting is a common practice among young women, irrespective of age, race, ethnicity and weight.^{1–4} Studies show that 60%–80% of young students have been on a diet within the previous year⁵ and many have a healthy body mass index (BMI).⁶ Dieting behavior starts at a young age and continues through college where female students have been shown to desire a BMI lower than their current BMI.^{1,7}

In the 2000 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a telephone survey of American adults, a higher percentage of women than men reported trying to lose weight, with women reporting trying to lose weight at a lower BMI than men.² Results from the National Health Interview Survey of US Adults showed that 38% of women were trying to lose weight. Attempting weight loss was common also among women (24%) with a normal BMI.³

Dieting may contribute to poor mental and physical health,⁸ and a BMI under 17.5 kg/m² exposes individuals to higher risks of nutrient deficiencies and lower fertility.⁹ Dieting is often a precursor to an eating disorder (ED), as a higher percentage of women who regularly diet report problems in eating behavior than those with

Correspondence: Samir Samman
Room 475, Discipline of Nutrition and Metabolism, School of Molecular Bioscience, Building G08, University of Sydney, NSW 2006 Australia
Tel +61 2 9351 2476
Fax +61 2 9351 6022
Email samir.samman@sydney.edu.au