

# Young vegetarians may be at risk of binge eating

---

Wed Apr 1, 2009 1:09pm EDT

]



By [Patricia Reaney](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) - Young vegetarians consuming plenty of fruits and vegetables are eating a healthy diet but they may also have an increased risk of binge eating and other unusual behaviors, researchers said.

After examining the diets, weight and drug and alcohol use of 2,516 teenagers and young adults aged 15 to 23 who took part in a survey in 31 Minnesota schools they found that young vegetarians reported more binge eating than meat eaters.

"Findings from the present study indicate that adolescent and young adult vegetarians may experience the health benefits associated with increased fruit and vegetable intake, and young adults may have the added advantage of decreased risk for overweight and obesity," said Romona Robinson-O'Brien, an assistant professor at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in Minnesota.

"However, current vegetarians may be at increased risk for binge eating, while former vegetarians may be at increased risk for extreme unhealthy weight control behaviors," she added.

Robinson-O'Brien and her team, who reported the findings in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, said about 20-25 percent of current and former vegetarians in the study displayed unhealthy weight-control behaviors such as taking diet pills, vomiting, using laxatives and diuretics and binge eating.

The majority of the vegetarians in the study were female. Although teenagers may see vegetarianism as a healthy option, Robinson-O'Brien said they might also be motivated by losing weight.

"Adolescents often experience a heightened sensitivity about their appearance and pressure to conform to a cultural ideal, resulting in body dissatisfaction and experimentation with various weight loss methods," she explained.

Doctors and parents of vegetarians, while acknowledging the benefits of a vegetarian diet, should also recognize the potential risk of eating problems.

She added that it would also be helpful for doctors to investigate a person's motive for choosing a vegetarian diet.

"When guiding adolescent and young adult vegetarians in proper nutrition and meal planning, clinicians should investigate an individual's motives for choosing a vegetarian diet and ask about current and former vegetarian status when assessing risk for disordered eating behaviors," Robinson-O'Brien added