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Contact: Lynelle Korte

jadamedia@elsevier.com

314-453-4841

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Young vegetarians may have healthier diets but could be at risk for disordered eating behaviors

St. Louis, MO, April 1, 2009, – Although adolescent and young adult vegetarians may eat a healthier diet, there is some evidence that they may be at increased risk for disordered eating behaviors. In a study published in the April 2009 issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, researchers observed that adolescent and young adult vegetarians may experience the health benefits associated with increased fruit and vegetable intake and young adults may experience the added benefit of decreased risk for overweight and obesity. 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.

Using the results of Project EAT-II: Eating Among Teens, researchers from the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Texas, Austin, analyzed the diets, weight status, weight control behaviors, and drug and alcohol use of 2,516 adolescents and young adults between the ages of 15 and 23. These participants had been part of Project EAT-I, an earlier survey of middle school and high school students from 31 Minnesota schools using in-class surveys, food frequency questionnaires, and anthropometric measures taken during the 1998 academic year.

Participants were identified as current (4.3%), former (10.8%), and never (84.9%) vegetarians. Subjects were divided into two cohorts, an adolescent (15-18) group and a young adult (19-23) group. They were questioned about binge eating and whether they felt a loss of control of their eating habits. More extreme weight control behaviors including taking diet pills, inducing vomiting, using laxatives, and using diuretics were also measured.

The authors found that among the younger cohort, no statistically significant differences were found with regard to weight status. Among the older cohort, current vegetarians had a lower body mass index and were less likely to be overweight or obese when compared to never vegetarians.

Among the younger cohort, a higher percentage of former vegetarians reported engaging in more extreme unhealthy weight control behaviors when compared to never vegetarians. Among the older cohort, a higher percentage of former vegetarians reported engaging in more extreme unhealthy weight control behaviors when compared to current and never vegetarians.

In the younger cohort, a higher percentage of current and former vegetarians reported engaging in binge eating with loss of control when compared to never vegetarians. In the older cohort, a higher percentage of current vegetarians reported engaging in binge eating with loss of control when compared to former and never vegetarians.

Writing in the article, Ramona Robinson-O'Brien, Assistant Professor, Nutrition Department, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, St. Joseph, MN, states, "Study results indicate that it would be beneficial for clinicians to ask adolescents and young adults about their current and former vegetarian status when assessing risk for disordered eating behaviors. Furthermore, when guiding adolescent and young adult vegetarians in proper nutrition and meal planning, it may also be important to investigate an individual's motives for choosing a vegetarian diet."

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The article is "Adolescent and young adult vegetarianism: Better dietary intake and weight outcomes but increased risk of disordered eating behaviors" by Ramona Robinson-O'Brien, PhD, RD, Cheryl L. Perry, PhD, Melanie M. Wall, PhD, Mary Story, PhD, RD, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD. It appears in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, Volume 109, Issue 4 (April 2009) published by Elsevier.
