

Eating behaviors and mentality among female college athletes and non-athletes

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Introduction & Background

Research on eating disorders has long indicated that females are more likely to experience problems with eating disorders and body image. Within this context, a relevant area of inquiry exists in understanding the eating behaviors and propensity for eating disorders among college age women, particularly intercollegiate athletes (Coelho, Soares, & Ribeiro, 2010).

This population is of particular interest for a few reasons. First, as athletes in active training, these women are expected to maintain rigorous workouts for the duration of their season. This elevated level of activity helps these women maintain a body composition, but at the same time calls for increased calorie intake. The athletic physique of female athletes may be perceived as going against prevailing gender norms, and lead to social physique anxiety (Haase, 2011). Some research suggests that college athlete women with eating disorders are less likely to use vomiting or dieting to control weight, and instead use increased exercise as a control (Greenleaf, et al., 2009). Pilot study data presented here will be supplemented with ongoing data collection to examine issues relating to eating behaviors and mentality among female college athletes and non-athletes.

Methods & Data

The data presented is derived from a pilot study of 94 college women age 18-25, approximately 27% of whom were college athletes. Surveys were administered anonymously online, and asked the sample questions relating to their eating behaviors, meal frequency, and how often they thought about food.

To build upon these pilot study findings, data collection will be carried out this fall on a substantially larger sample at a number of U.S. universities. Purposive sampling will be directed toward collecting data from an adequate sample of NCAA female athletes, including gathering of a diversity of data from women in different sports, each of which may have different demands in regard to length of season, intensity of workouts, and typical body type expected for athletes in those sports.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results from this pilot data suggest that significantly more of female athletes (36%) report never skipping meals compared to female non-athletes (15%). Additionally, significantly more female athletes (76%) report eating 3 meals per day, compared to non-athletes (53%). These significant findings are expected based upon the physical demands on intercollegiate athletes. However, more important to this study is the role that eating and body image play in these women's lives.

Athletes were significantly more likely to report thinking about food multiple times per day (76%) than non-athletes (44%). Supplemental qualitative data also

suggests that athletes were more likely to snack on high-protein, low fat foods throughout the day.

No significant differences existed between athletes and non-athletes in regard to BMI. Despite overall differing levels of physical activity, this may be a result of selection relating to body type for becoming an NCAA athlete.

Approximately one quarter of athlete and non-athlete women reported being satisfied with their weight. Taken together, these findings demonstrate the expected negative perceptions of body image, and suggest that even women at very high levels of physical activity are not able to maintain a body image they are pleased with. Further, athletic body types may not fit commonly perceived norms for the female body.

Female college athletes are marginally more likely to report having been diagnosed with an eating disorder than non-athlete women (16% vs. 1.5%). Future work on this topic should examine potential reasons behind this finding, including whether the greater awareness of diet among female athletes contributes to this disparity.

Discussion

As noted, the data presented are from a pilot study and a number of directions for additional research are suggested by these findings. Particularly, the next round of data collection will examine how female athletes manage the increased caloric demands required of their activity level in relation to meeting societal demands relating to female body image.

Preliminary findings suggest that female college athletes are acutely aware of their food intake, both in regard to quality and quantity. Of particular interest is how the role of being an intercollegiate athlete impacts female body image and eating behaviors in light of societal norms suggesting that an athletic or muscular female body is less feminine.

References

- Coelho, G.M., Soares, E.A., & Ribeiro, B.G. (2010). Are female athletes at increased risk for disordered eating and its complications? *Appetite*, 55, 379-387.
- Greenleaf, C., Petrie, T.A., Carter, J., & Reel, J.J. (2009) Female collegiate athletes: Prevalence of Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating Behaviors. *Journal of American College Health*, 57.
- Haase, A.M. (2011). Weight perception among female athletes: Associations with disordered eating correlates and behavior. *Eating Behaviors*, 12, 64-67.

Descriptive Characteristics of Eating Mentality and Behaviors of Female College Athletes and Non-Athletes

	Athlete	Non-Athlete	Significance
Age	20.64	20.31	
BMI	22.98	23.39	
Never skip meals	0.36	0.15	**
Eat 3 meals/day	0.76	0.53	**
Wish think about food less	0.36	0.25	
Trying to lose weight	0.56	0.44	
Think about food multiple times/day	0.76	0.44	***
Satisfied with weight	0.28	0.25	
Diagnosed with eating disorder	0.16	0.02	*

N=94

*p<0.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01