

# Eating Disorder Behaviors and Weight Concerns are Common in Women Over 50

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An online survey as part of the Gender and Body Image Study (GABI), published in the International Journal of Eating Disorders, found that there is no age limitation to disordered eating. The survey found eating disorder symptoms in 13% of women 50 and above over the past five years, with over 70% reporting they were attempting to lose weight. The study found that 62% of women felt their weight or shape had a negative impact on their life. To many people who are still under the false impression that eating disorders are the province of adolescent and young adult women, these results are a real eye-opener.

Although the exact symptoms of eating disorders in midlife do not differ much from eating disorders at a younger life stage, the context can be drastically different. For a woman struggling in midlife, the disorder can affect her marriage or partnership, her children, her work, and even her parents if she is caring for them as they age. Treatment in younger women often includes family based therapy, which is not always appropriate for someone at a later stage of life who might not have the same support system as someone younger. Parents may no longer be alive and partners are often a replacement for the support and participation in therapy.

Health effects of eating disorders in older women are also of a high concern. As a woman's body becomes less resilient with age, older bodies have less ease in bouncing back from an eating disorder. There are greater numbers of gastrointestinal, cardiac, bone and even dental effects of eating disorders as women mature. This means clinicians should keep eating disorders on their radar screen regardless of the age of the patient- this means anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, as well as symptoms of these disorders if a person does not meet full diagnostic criteria. Many adult women are especially hesitant to bring up their eating disorder with their health care providers for fear of being told that they should have grown out of it, or that it is a young person's disorder.

A larger study with a more diverse population would determine the extent to which the patterns reported are seen in various racial and ethnic groups and to determine the role that menopause has on the emergence of eating disorder symptoms.

**Links to websites:**

<http://unceatingdisorders.org>

<http://womaninthemirrorbook.com>

**Full citation:**

Danielle Gagne, Ann Von Holle, Kimberly Brownley, Cristin Runfola, Sara Hofmeier, Kateland Branch, Cynthia Bulik, *Eating Disorder Symptoms and Weight and Shape Concerns in a Large Web-Based Convenience Sample of Women Ages 50 and Above: Results of the Gender and Body Image Study (GABI)*, International Journal of Eating Disorders, Wiley-Blackwell, DOI: 10.1001/eat.220121