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Dangerous 'Drunkorexia' hits college campuses

by **Serena McNiff**, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—College students are known to drink too much and eat a poor diet.

So it may not be surprising that new research has revealed that these two unhealthy behaviors often collide on campus.

When students diet, exercise, or purge to purposely offset calories they consume from alcohol, experts sometimes call this "drunkorexia."

The new study, published online recently in the journal *Australian Psychologist*, discovered that drunkorexia is incredibly common among female college students, and certain psychological thought patterns may be partially to blame.

Based on a survey of nearly 500 female university students in Australia, researchers found that eight in 10 had engaged in drunkorexic behaviors—skipping meals, drinking low-calorie or sugar-free alcoholic beverages, and purging or exercising after drinking—over a three-month period.

Close to three in 10 reported engaging in these behaviors to offset the calories they took in from alcohol. They did not otherwise show signs of an eating disorder.

The study also found that those who engaged in drunkorexic behaviors were likely to share particular thought patterns—called early maladaptive schemas—or deeply held beliefs about oneself that often develop in childhood.

The researchers identified insufficient self-control, emotional deprivation and social isolation as the three particular schemas associated with drunkorexia.

"Drunkorexia behavior appears to be motivated by two key social norms for young adults—consuming alcohol and thinness," said study author Alycia Powell-Jones, a clinical psychologist at the University of South Australia.

"However, our research indicates that this behavior can be a coping strategy potentially to manage social anxieties, through becoming accepted and fitting in," she added.

Prior research has confirmed that excessive drinking and disordered eating often go hand-in-hand, but this study was the first to identify potential underlying causes.

The prevalence of drunkorexia should be cause for concern, according to two experts, as the combination of these two behaviors comes with consequences.

One concern is that restricting food while drinking alcohol increases the intensity of intoxication.

"Having food in your stomach prior to drinking helps to slow down how quickly alcohol enters your bloodstream," explained Lisa Fucito, an associate professor of psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Conn.

And alcohol is not a replacement for food—it is just empty calories, added Fucito.

"Individuals who engage in these patterns may actually put on weight and have nutritional deficits," she noted.

Besides the well-established dangers inherent to eating disorders and excessive alcohol consumption, the combination heightens the risk that one will progress towards more severe forms of the two conditions.

According to Simon Sherry, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, "Individuals who engage in these relatively common

behaviors will be at risk to develop the full-blown version of an eating disorder or the full-blown version of a substance use disorder."

Sherry said, "One of the riskiest things here is that you could move further down a continuum of having a mental illness."

But he emphasized that there are well-established interventions to treat eating disorders, and he believes that these techniques could manage drunkorexia.

"We have roughly three decades of research that suggests cognitive behavioral therapy is an effective intervention for disordered eating, and I think that intervention could easily and flexibly take into account this pattern of behavior whereby alcohol gets woven into a pattern of disordered eating," Sherry said.

"I'd be quite optimistic about helping someone who was suffering from this particular collision between food and alcohol problem," he said.

As this study revealed, there may be deeply ingrained psychological factors that contribute to the development of drunkorexia, and Fucito said that effective intervention would need to address them.

"An effective intervention needs to address both risks—the pressures to be thin and to drink heavily," Fucito explained.