

# Is 'clean eating' just dirty rhetoric?

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New research published today in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* finds "clean eating" is perceived as overwhelmingly positive by young people, but those optimistic impressions of "clean diets" may signal a risk for eating disorders. Scientists are also calling for additional research to better understand the nature of the "clean eating" diet fad.

Suman Ambwani, a noted scholar in the field of disordered eating and associate professor of psychology at Dickinson College, and a team of researchers, asked nearly 150 [college students](#) to define "clean eating." The students also were asked to read five vignettes featuring different "clean" diets and rate whether they thought the diets were "healthy," reflected "clean eating" and whether they might try them out. The subjects' responses varied, but overwhelmingly favored "clean eating," even if the so-called "clean" diets caused problems in work, social and emotional functioning.

"It is concerning that our respondents had [positive attitudes](#) toward extreme 'clean eating' diets that cause distress and disruption," said Ambwani. "We know dieting can create an increased risk for developing eating disorders, so we need to better understand how ostensibly healthy diets may devolve into disordered eating."

Definitions of "clean eating" typically include elements such as eating local, "real," organic, plant-based, home-cooked foods, but frequently also tout more extreme strategies, like eliminating gluten, grains or dairy. Trendy, "clean eating" diets are often highlighted on social and [popular media](#), typically by nonexpert celebrities, but there is no [scientific](#)

[consensus](#) around what constitutes "clean eating."

The study's results "highlight the need to train consumers to better distinguish between trustworthy and fraudulent sources of information on nutrition and health behaviors," said Ambwani. "'Clean eating' also appears to bestow an element of moral superiority," she noted. "It can also signify status and is importantly linked with health-related attitudes and behaviors."

**More information:** Suman Ambwani et al, Is #cleaneating a healthy or harmful dietary strategy? Perceptions of clean eating and associations with disordered eating among young adults, *Journal of Eating Disorders* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s40337-019-0246-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-019-0246-2)

Provided by Dickinson College

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