

# food for thought

**When does an interest in a healthy diet go too far? *Teen Vogue* reports on orthorexia, a disturbing new eating pattern. Photographed by Robin Broadbent.**

For as long as I can remember, I've looked at food labels to study what's good and bad for me. But this year, I finally got my whole diet under control," says nineteen-year-old Sadie.\* Each day, the college sophomore diligently keeps a list of what she eats. She highlights items in either green (for "good" choices) or pink (for "bad") to track her progress. "Yesterday, I ate organic pineapple chunks, an organic pomelo—basically a large grapefruit—and drank two cups of green tea. I highlighted them all as green," she notes. "But then I nearly passed out, so for dinner my boyfriend made me a tiny plate of pasta with baby tomatoes and a few salad leaves. For that entry, I highlighted the pasta as pink. Next time, I'm going to replace it with whole-wheat pasta. If I have to write down regular pasta again, I won't have achieved anything."

Orthorexia, a new term used to describe a fixation on healthy eating, is an issue on the rise with teenage girls. Unlike clinically recognized eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, orthorexics are concerned about

the purity of food rather than simply striving for thinness, says Karen Stickler, Psy.D., a health psychologist specializing in binge eating, body image, eating disorders, obesity, and wellness at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. "When a person refuses to eat anything perceived as unhealthy, it is a problem," explains Tara Gidus, R.D., an Orlando, Florida-based National Spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "It's not quite an eating disorder, but it is a form of disordered eating. It could easily lead to bulimia if you binge on unhealthy foods and feel like you need to get rid of it. And the rigid nature of the disease could also lead to anorexia."

Jessica,\* fourteen, first started monitoring her diet after researching the negative effects of high-fructose corn syrup. Following a strict diet of organic fruits, juices, milk, and oatmeal gives her a boost of self-esteem, she says. "I don't want processed food in my body," explains the Illinois freshman. "It's all about purity. I refuse to put poison into my body. I'll stay this way forever." Vanessa,\* sixteen, from Denver, shares Jessica's food concerns: "Once you realize what you take in when you consume ➤

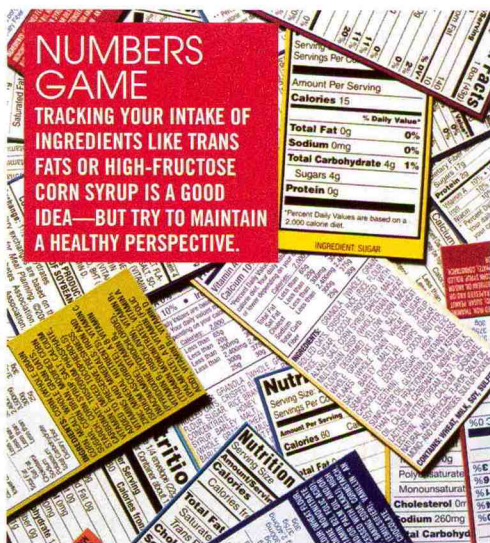
these chemical-laden foods, there's no going back. It's like eating Windex—why would you do it? Would you abstain from Windex forever? Yes, I can genuinely say I would. I feel a general euphoria from eating so purely.”

Medical experts have noticed an increase in teenage girls obsessed with organic and health foods, due in part to a desire to copy the heavily restrictive diets popularized by celebrities and the media. The widely successful *New York Times* best seller *Skinny Bitch* (Running Press) and its sophomore

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sequel, *Skinny Bitch In the Kitchen*, urges readers to abandon all dairy, meats, and refined sugars to reap the benefits of a healthier lifestyle and a skinnier body. “The books are basically no different than any other unhealthy diet because they go to such an extreme—they’re merely packaged to *appear* healthy. It’s simply not smart for teenagers to eliminate entire food groups. There’s nothing wrong with eating junk food once in a while,” says Susan S. Bartell, Psy.D., a psychologist specializing in girls, and author of *Dr. Susan’s Girls-Only Weight Loss Guide* (Parent Positive Press).

Plus, according to Brooke Alpert, R.D., a registered dietitian and the founder of B Nutritious, a nutrition counseling practice in



New York City, many girls have an inaccurate definition of healthy foods. “Just because a food is low-calorie or organic does not mean that it is good for you,” she says. “It’s really a constant battle in convincing girls that a 130-calorie yogurt could actually be a healthier option, due to its nutritional content, than a 60-calorie yogurt.”

So what’s the difference between being health-conscious and health-obsessed? Since orthorexia is not a medically defined disease, diagnosis can be difficult. But experts agree that when the interest starts to interfere with overall functioning and leads to self-isolation it becomes a problem. “It’s great to eat health food, but when it’s all that you think about, it’s no longer healthy. Or, when it prevents you from living your life naturally—like if you stop socializing and dating because you’re too tired, or you don’t exercise because you don’t have the strength, or you can’t focus in school because you’re too hungry,” says Bartell.

Jackie,\* seventeen, avoids social outings with friends completely, for fear of temptation or projecting a sense of superiority over friends unable to maintain such a strict diet. “My friends love going out for pizza or ice cream, which is something I can’t even get



close to for risk of temptation,” says the junior from Oklahoma. “I try not to look down on them, but it’s hard not to sometimes. In the end, it is always rewarding for me to think, Oh, I made it another day, or, I was so strong to not give in.”

Eliminating foods, refusing social invitations where food is involved, preaching to other people that the foods they’re eating are bad for them, and excessively thinking about food choices are all warning signs that an interest in healthy eating could actually be an unhealthy obsession. “If any of these symptoms sound familiar to you, make an appointment with a professional who specializes in eating disorders, such as your school therapist or a registered dietitian,” says Gidus.

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“It’s important to find out the underlying issues surrounding why you feel a need to have such a tight control over what and how you eat.”

Alpert suggests girls start by taking small steps, such as going light on the dressing instead of having it on the side, or trying to occasionally eat out with friends. “Small changes will not only help to reinstall a comfortable association with food, but a realistic return to natural and truly healthy eating. That’s the most important thing.” —ANDREA KASPRZAK

*\*Names have been changed.*

## proof positive

**Stop obsessing and boost your body image and self-esteem with these tips.**

### bust a move

A study from the University of Minnesota found that, in early adolescence, girls’ physical activity (outside of organized sports) declines. In fact, teen girls are half as likely as teen boys to be active. “Students who play sports build confidence as well as learn about healthy choices,” says Nicole Molinari, a trainer at Manhattan’s Peak Performance gym.

### the write stuff

Bad day? Put it on paper. “Don’t bottle up your feelings. Start journaling,” says Judy Molnar, vice president of Iron Girl races. Expressing your emotions won’t just lift your spirits, it could also improve your overall health. In her book, *Be Happy Without Being Perfect* (Crown), Alice D. Domar, Ph.D., contends that journaling boosts immunity and decreases anxiety.

### different drummer

“One of the best ways to build self-esteem is to figure out what your passion is and pursue it,” suggests Domar. Don’t be surprised if your interests stray from those of your friends and family. “Stop listening to what other people want you to do—when you do something that you are genuinely interested in, it makes you feel good about yourself,” she adds.

### helping hand

Volunteering doesn’t just look good on your college application. “Serving others builds fellowship, confidence, and gives a sense of pride,” says Molnar. One survey found that people who helped out in their communities reported higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and physical health over a two-year period.

—MAURA LYNCH