

# Prevalence and Psychosocial Determinants of Postpartum Eating Disorders: A Mixed-Method Study on Maternal Health and Body Image

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## Abstract

Postpartum eating disorders are increasingly recognized as a significant public health concern. These disorders may include restrictive eating, binge eating, or compensatory behaviors triggered by postpartum stress, body dissatisfaction, and societal pressure to regain pre-pregnancy shape. This mixed-method study aimed to explore the prevalence, associated risk factors, and emotional correlates of postpartum eating behaviors among new mothers. A sample of 90 mothers aged 20–40 years who had given birth within the past five years completed a 24-item online questionnaire assessing eating habits, body image, and psychological well-being. Results indicated that 74% of participants felt strong pressure to lose weight, 70% skipped meals, and 56% experienced guilt after eating. Over half reported body dissatisfaction and emotional distress related to food. Qualitative findings from literature review supported these outcomes, highlighting the interplay between depression, anxiety, and body image. Findings suggest a need for early screening, family education, and inclusion of eating disorder assessments in postpartum care to enhance maternal well-being.

Keywords: Postpartum eating disorder; body image; maternal mental health; eating behavior; perinatal care.

## Introduction

The postpartum period represents a critical phase in a woman's life characterized by physical recovery, hormonal shifts, and psychological adjustments. Although often portrayed as joyful, it can also be a period of vulnerability, where social expectations and self-perception significantly influence mental health. Increasing evidence indicates that postpartum women are at heightened risk of developing disordered eating behaviors or experiencing a relapse of pre-existing eating disorders. Postpartum eating disorders encompass a spectrum of behaviors including restrictive dieting, binge eating, purging, and excessive concern with body image. Factors such as pressure to 'bounce back,' comparison with idealized social media portrayals, and emotional distress contribute to these patterns. Despite their prevalence, postpartum eating disorders remain underrecognized in both clinical and community settings. This study seeks to identify the patterns, prevalence, and psychosocial determinants of postpartum eating disorders and to suggest strategies for early identification and prevention.

## Literature Review

Prior studies highlight that postpartum eating disorders can develop de novo or reappear in women with prior histories. Coker and Abraham (2014) found body dissatisfaction to be a leading predictor, while Fairburn and Cooper (2011) associated eating disorders with postpartum depression. Micali et al. (2007) emphasized that shame and stigma often

delay help-seeking. Conti et al. (2019) reported adverse outcomes on maternal-infant bonding and breastfeeding when eating disorders remain untreated. Collectively, literature underscores the multifactorial etiology involving biological, psychological, and sociocultural contributors.

## Methodology

A mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) descriptive design was adopted to explore eating behaviors, emotional well-being, and self-perception among postpartum mothers. Ninety mothers aged 20–40 years who had delivered within the last five years were recruited through online parenting forums and community groups. A structured 24-item online questionnaire assessed five domains: emotional relationship with food, body image, mental well-being, physical health, and support systems. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using percentages and frequency distributions in Microsoft Excel. Qualitative literature findings were synthesized thematically to interpret patterns and contextualize numerical trends. Participants provided informed consent and anonymity was maintained.

## Results

Among the 90 participants:

- 74% reported high pressure to lose weight post-delivery.
- 70% skipped meals to control weight.
- 56% experienced guilt after eating.
- 57% expressed anxiety or dissatisfaction with body image.
- 60% had a pre-existing eating disorder history.

Only 66% felt comfortable discussing these concerns with healthcare providers. These findings reveal both widespread body dissatisfaction and limited help-seeking behavior among postpartum mothers.

## Discussion

The findings corroborate previous research that links postpartum eating disturbances with emotional distress and social pressures. The high prevalence of weight-related anxiety underscores the pervasive impact of societal beauty standards and online 'bounce-back' narratives. Consistent with Fairburn and Cooper (2011), depressive and anxious symptoms appear to amplify disordered eating behaviors. Notably, even mothers without prior eating disorder history exhibited risk factors, indicating that postpartum vulnerability extends beyond pre-existing psychopathology. Integrating eating disorder screening into routine postnatal visits could facilitate early intervention. Additionally, social support and psychoeducation may mitigate body dissatisfaction and maladaptive eating patterns.

## Conclusion

Postpartum eating disorders pose a significant yet underrecognized threat to maternal health. This study demonstrates that disordered eating and negative body image are prevalent across diverse groups of new mothers. Awareness, routine screening, and supportive interventions should be prioritized in postpartum care programs. Addressing this issue holistically will improve both maternal and infant outcomes.

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