

‘Dis-comfort eating’: A cross sectional investigation into the use of food as a coping strategy for managing chronic pain

Over three-quarters of an online sample of 151 adults with chronic pain endorsed comfort eating in response to chronic pain flare-ups. Furthermore, pain-induced comfort eating frequency was not dependent on Body Mass Index (BMI) categories. These findings suggest that pain-induced comfort eating is common amongst individuals with chronic pain across the entire BMI spectrum. Chronic pain intensity did not significantly predict pain-induced comfort eating. Moreover, experiential avoidance and pain catastrophising did not significantly mediate the chronic pain intensity-comfort eating relationship. However, there was a significant indirect effect of chronic pain intensity on pain-induced comfort eating through stress. Furthermore, pain-induced comfort eating significantly predicted increased BMI, and BMI in turn significantly predicted greater chronic pain interference, indicating that this behaviour is likely to be maladaptive through its association with these harmful outcomes.

This study found evidence to support an indirect relationship between chronic pain intensity and pain-induced comfort eating through stress, revealing that it is the stress associated with pain rather than pain itself that appears to be the driving factor of this behaviour.

These findings have revealed that pain-induced comfort-eating and stress represent promising treatment targets for chronic pain that could potentially help break the cycle of pain-induced comfort eating, weight gain, obesity and increased chronic pain interference.