Introduction: Psychological factors are important in the development of obesity; however these are frequently underestimated in intervention programs. Objective: To examine the association of mental health with altered eating behavior related to weight gain, and with abdominal obesity among college students in order to provide more comprehensive guidelines for intervention programs.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was performed with 1,122 university students (from a total population of 1,820 freshmen students) at the Metropolitan Autonomous University, Mexico City. Body mass index and waist circumference (WC) were recorded. A six items questionnaire was applied to assess altered eating behavior. Self-reported questionnaires for depression (Beck Depression Inventory), anxiety (General Anxiety Disorder Scale of Carrol and Davidson), and impulsiveness symptoms (Plutchik Impulsivity Scale) were used. Multiple logistic regression models were performed. Results: An increased WC was associated with depression symptoms (OR = 1.4), female sex (OR = 1.5), and age (OR = 1.1). Students with altered eating behaviors showed elevated levels of impulsivity (e.g. have difficulties to stop eating, OR = 4.2) and depression (e.g. have problem to eat at regular times, OR=6.98). In addition, higher WC was associated with female sex, parents’ obesity, and unhealthy eating behaviors (e.g. have difficulties to stop eating, OR = 1.42; and constantly feel hungry, and eat too much, OR = 2.25). Conclusions: Although preventive programs directed at development of adequate eating habits and physical activity are considered a key component of intervention programs, strategies for the management of emotions, the promotion of positive mood and impulsivity-reduction techniques are a necessary complement for a comprehensive approach to overweight and obesity.

Keywords
Obesity, Overweight, Mental health, Students, Eating behaviour.