



## What are Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders are defined as eating habits that are hurtful to an individual and at times can result in death. Recent statistics estimate that 24 Million Americans, in which approximately 10-15% are men, currently cope with this issue. The typical age of onset is anywhere from 12-18 years of age, but can develop much earlier or later in life. Unfortunately there are specific groups in our society whose weight can prove critical to their performances and hence are more likely to develop an eating disorder.

Contrary to popular belief, an eating disorder is not solely based on food. There are many contributing factors that lead to the emergence of an eating disorder. Loss of control, anxiety and/or depression, sexual abuse, genetics, family emotional problems, perfectionism, and the media are just some of the possible factors, although no defined cause has been established.

The most common types of eating disorders:

Anorexia Nervosa is a potentially life threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and extreme weight loss. According to the American Psychiatric Association 90-95% of Anorexia Nervosa cases are female. These individuals will be resistant to maintain the “normal” minimum body weight for their particular age and height. In addition, they have an intense fear of becoming “fat”, and often times have a disturbance in their perception of their body weight or shape, usually denying an emaciated appearance.

Bulimia nervosa (binge-purge) is an eating disorder characterized by a cycle of rapid ingestion of large quantities of foods over a short period of time, followed by self-induced vomiting, excessive exercising or the use of laxatives and/or diuretics to prevent weight gain. The bulimic cycle can become habitual and highly addictive. Unlike, anorexia nervosa, bulimic individuals usually maintain a normal body weight with only mild fluctuations. These individuals can be described as perfectionists, obedient, over compliant, and highly motivated, especially in an athletic setting. They will often times base their self-worth on their body’s appearance, neglecting other aspects of their character, generally leading to poor self-esteem.

High Risk Athletes

Gymnasts

Wrestlers  
Dancers  
Models  
Actors  
Cross country runners  
Figure Skaters  
Lightweight crew

### Warning Signs:

1. Food Behaviors
  - Skipping meals
  - Refusal to eat in front of others
  - May chew food but spits it out before swallowing
  - Always has an excuse not to eat
  - Chooses primarily low-fat, low-nutrient foods
  - Decreased intake of fatty foods
  - Obsessively reads foods labels
  - Disappears for short period of time after meals
  - Eats food in small bowls or serving utensils
  - Eats food in atypical quantities
  
2. Appearance
  - Wears baggy clothes, or layers clothing to hide body
  - Obsesses about clothing size
  - Spends a great deal of time inspecting one's self in the mirror
  - Usually finds body part to criticize
  - Discoloration and tooth decay
  - Calluses on back of hand/knuckles from self-induced vomiting
  - Development of fine white hair on body in response to decreased body fat (lanugo)
  
3. Exercise Behaviors
  - Exercises excessively and compulsively
  - Tires easily but continues to push oneself
  - Athletic performance suffers
  - Consumes sports drinks and supplements, total caloric intake is less than caloric output
  
4. Thoughts and Beliefs
  - Irrational
  - Denies that anything is wrong
  - Argues with people who are trying to help

- Difficulty concentrating
  - Decreased impulse control
  - Hold one's self to rigid standards
5. Feelings
- Trouble expressing how they feel
  - Hyperirritability
  - Experiences depression, anxiety, guilt or loneliness
6. Self-harm and Self-Injury
- Cutting or burning of flesh as a coping mechanism
7. Social Behaviors
- Avoidance of social situations
  - Withdraws from friends and family
  - Attempts to please everyone

#### Intervention:

It is crucial to know when and how to refer an individual who is suspected of having an eating disorder. The earlier professional help is sought out and the disorder is identified, the better chance there is of a successful recovery. Approach the person privately at an appropriate time and place and express your concerns in a supportive way. In many cases, the affected individual may have difficulty admitting a problem exists. Therefore the patient's feelings should be taken into consideration. It is not advised to directly attack the patient's behaviors and/or physical appearance.

#### Prevention

- Education of athletes and coaches about the signs and symptoms of eating disorders and the importance of early identification.
- Modeling of good nutritional practices by family members and coaches to promote healthy eating habits
- De-emphasize body weight and focus more on total fitness

#### References and Additional Information:

1. [www.eatingdisorderinfo.org](http://www.eatingdisorderinfo.org)
2. [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)
3. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/eating-disorders/complete-index.shtml>