



BalanceWorks® Newsletter

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Understanding Eating Disorders

The term eating disorder actually refers to a group of conditions in which one becomes excessively preoccupied with food and weight. Although eating disorders are a mental/behavioral health concern, if left untreated, they can have serious physical health consequences.

At this point, experts do not know the exact cause of eating disorders, and in fact, there may be many causes that contribute to the development of an eating disorder. A few possible eating disorder causes include:

Genetics/Biology – People with first degree relatives that have had an eating disorder may be more likely to develop one themselves.

Emotional/Behavioral Health – Some people with eating disorders may also have concurrent behavioral health concerns such as low self-esteem, perfectionism, or impulsive tendencies that may contribute to the disorder.

Society – There is no doubt that “pop culture” cultivates an image of thinness and perfection in the way we are “supposed” to look. Some researchers believe that this image we constantly see portrayed in the media fuels the desire to be extremely thin, contributing to eating disorders and/or an unhealthy relationship with food.

Activities – According to the Mayo Clinic, athletes, actors, dancers, and models are

at a higher risk of eating disorders, with the risk being particularly high for ballerinas, gymnasts, runners, and wrestlers.

There are three main types of eating disorder, each with their own symptoms and associated health problems including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.

Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia is typically characterized by self starvation and excessive weight loss. Approximately 90%-95% of anorexia sufferers are female and it is one of the most common psychiatric diagnoses in young women. Anorexia typically appears in early to mid adolescence.

Signs and symptoms of anorexia include:

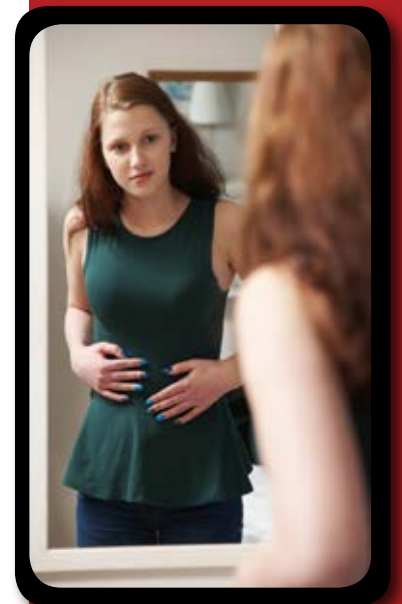
- Intense fear or anxiety over gaining weight
- Obsession with body image
- Distorted body image – insisting that one’s self is “fat” even when they are clearly not
- Dramatic weight loss
- Refusal to eat/denial of hunger
- Food rituals (excessive chewing, rearranging food on the plate, etc)
- Excessive exercise
- Social withdrawal and irritability

It is important to treat anorexia as soon as it is discovered as it can lead to health problems such as:

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- Trouble sleeping
- Menstrual irregularities
- Constipation
- Dehydration
- Abdominal pain
- Muscle loss and weakness
- Decrease in bone density
- Irregular heart beats
- Low blood pressure
- Eventual heart failure

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia is typically characterized by episodes of bingeing and purging – eating large amounts of food, then trying to rid oneself of the calories through vomiting or laxative use. Approximately 80% of bulimia sufferers are female and interestingly they are often of a normal weight or even a bit overweight, making it harder to recognize bulimia just by looking at someone.

Signs and symptoms of bulimia include:

- An excessively negative body image
- Evidence of binge eating – large amounts of food disappearing over a short period of time or finding food wrappers or containers hidden out of sight
- Evidence of purging – frequent bathroom trips directly following meals, sudden laxative use
- Adherence to a rigid exercise routine in order to “burn off” any calories consumed
- Low self esteem
- Damaged teeth and gums
- Unusual swelling of the jaws or cheeks
- Scars or calluses on the knuckles or hands
- Social Withdrawal
- Forming daily routine around the ability to binge and purge

Bulimia can also cause serious health consequences including:

- Tooth decay
- Chronic irregular bowel movements and constipation
- Inflammation and possible rupture of the esophagus from frequent vomiting
- Severe electrolyte imbalance, which can lead

to irregular heartbeat, and possible heart failure

Binge-Eating Disorder

Binge-eating is characterized by regularly eating large amounts of food (binging), well beyond the point of feeling full, without compensating for the extra calories through purging or exercising. Approximately 60% of binge-eaters are female and 40% are male. Binge-eaters typically range from being of a normal weight to being obese.

Signs and symptoms of binge-eating include:

- Eating extremely fast
- Eating to the point of discomfort or pain
- Frequently eating alone
- Feelings of shame or guilt after eating

Binge-eating can also contribute to serious health problems including:

- High blood pressure and/or cholesterol
- Adult onset diabetes
- Gallbladder disease
- Heart disease

As you can see, eating disorders are very serious and can cause significant emotional and physical problems. If you suspect that you or a loved one is suffering from an eating disorder, it is important to seek professional medical help right away.

Remember that your EAP is available if you should need assistance regarding a potential eating disorder.

This article is informational only and is not a substitute for medical advice.

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