



EATING DISORDERS ARE NOT PRETTY

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Eating disorders don't just affect teenage girls. In fact, between five and 15 percent of people affected by eating disorders are men, and all ages – from children as young as seven years old to middle-aged adults – can suffer from an eating disorder. Here's what you need to know:

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are a group of diseases characterized by extremes. Patients that are affected often experience severe disturbances in eating behavior, such as extreme reduction of food intake or extreme overeating, or feelings of extreme distress or concern about body weight or shape. An estimated four percent of the population is affected by an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are real, treatable, medical illnesses with complex underlying psychological and biological causes. There is often co-existence of other psychiatric disorders such as depression, substance abuse or anxiety disorders. People affected are often very aware when it is a problem because it interferes with their life. They often experience constant thoughts about food and weight. They may even withdraw from society.

Eating disorders at their worst can lead to serious physical problems such as electrolyte imbalance, kidney failure and death.

What is anorexia nervosa?

People who suffer from anorexia nervosa have a distorted body image: they see themselves as fat even when they are extremely thin, starving or malnourished. Often people with anorexia restrict food severely and weigh themselves excessively. Eating, food and weight control become obsessions. Many patients also exercise excessively.

Medical problems can complicate anorexia, such as thinning bones, brittle hair, anemia, muscle weakness, severe constipation, low blood pressure, sensation of being cold all the time and extreme fatigue.

Treatment of anorexia often involves antidepressants, counseling, group therapy and support groups. Sometimes it requires hospitalization to help people recover from medical consequences and to learn positive eating behaviors and attitudes. Typically, the longer someone has been affected by anorexia, the longer treatment is required.

What is bulimia nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by recurrent and frequent episodes of eating unusually large amounts of food (binge-eating), and feeling a lack of control over the eating. Following the binge eating, the patient compensates by getting rid of the food, either by making herself throw up (purge), using laxatives, fasting or excessive exercise.

People with bulimia can be normal weight; however, they have intense fear of gaining weight, want to lose weight, or are unhappy with their body size and shape. Usually, bulimia behaviors are done secretly, because it is often associated with shame.

Medical problems can affect people with bulimia, such as electrolyte imbalances, gastrointestinal problems, and oral- and tooth-related problems (sore throat, swollen glands, worn tooth enamel from exposure to stomach acids), kidney problems and severe dehydration.

Treatment of bulimia is similar to anorexia and may involve medications and a combination of individual and/or group therapy.

Why do people develop eating disorders?

It is not clear why people develop eating disorders but it's clearly a complex physical and psychological illness. Some people have a history of physical or emotional abuse. Some are exposed to messages about body image and weight from home, the media, friends and role models and are compelled to fit society's expectation about weight. Patients affected by an eating disorder often are perfectionists who strive to meet others' expectations. Sometimes a family history of eating disorders can increase the risk of developing the disease.

Eating disorders develop most rapidly in adolescent girls, but can affect men and boys, and older and younger people. There is also a rising trend among gay men.

Conclusion

Recovery from an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia can be a long process. People affected must start by becoming medically stable. They then must work through the reasons they developed the eating disorder and adopt new, healthier coping mechanisms which include professional help and support groups.

You can get more information about eating disorders from your doctor, mental health provider or hospital. Here are some Web sites for additional information:

- Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous, www.anorexicsandbulimicsanonymousaba.com
- www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
- Nemours foundation Web site for kid's health, www.nemours.org