

Pacific Beach Middle School
Counseling Center

Teens and Eating Disorders

What is an Eating Disorder?

An eating disorder is an obsession with food and weight that disrupts normal body functions and daily life activities, and generally involves self-critical, negative thoughts and feelings about body weight and food.

What are the most common eating disorders?

Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Compulsive Overeating

All eating disorders are dangerous. One who suffers from a certain eating disorder can also display behaviors from all three, and may swap one eating disorder for another.

Statistics:

- It is estimated that about 1% of American teens have an eating disorder. This means that out of 400 students most likely four of them have an eating disorder.
- 10 out of 100 young women have an eating disorder
- Eating disorders usually start in the teens but may begin as early as age 8 (The age is getting increasingly younger)
- 90% of victims with an eating disorder are women
- 8,000,000 or more people in the United States have an eating disorder
- Most people who develop an eating disorder are between the ages of 14 and 18 (although they can develop much earlier)

Dangers Associated with and diseases triggered or caused by Eating Disorder Behaviors:

Malnutrition, dehydration, electrolyte imbalances, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, insomnia, swelling (in face and cheeks), dry skin, brittle hair and nails, hair loss, high/low blood pressure, hair growth on face, back and arms (lanugo), diabetes, amenorrhea (loss of menstrual cycle), bruising easily, dental problems, infertility, depression, fatigue, death.

Characteristics and symptoms of Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa: This is characterized by a significant weight loss resulting from excessive dieting. People who suffer from this disease do not want to eat and are afraid of gaining weight. People with Anorexia Nervosa:

- Have a poor body image
- Could possibly exercise excessively
- Obsessed with any amount of food they intake – if any
- Usually strive for perfection
- Put others needs ahead of theirs
- Feel they can only control their food intake and nothing else around them.
- Usually do not think they have a problem

A person suffering from Anorexia Nervosa may drop weight to about 20% below normal, become withdrawn, exercise excessively, deny being hungry, feels fat, wear baggy clothes, have fainting spells, have headaches, irregular menstruation, have excuses for not eating meals, be irritable.

Bulimia Nervosa: This is characterized by a cycle of binge eating followed by purging to try to rid the body of the unwanted calories just consumed. (Binging and purging vary from each person. One may eat a cookie and then need to purge, while others may induce many more calories and then purge). People suffering from Bulimia Nervosa:

- Do not feel good about themselves
- Usually strive for the approval of others
- Food becomes their only source of comfort
- Do realize they have a problem

A person suffering from Bulimia Nervosa binge eats, eats secretively, visits bathroom after consuming food, vomits, uses Laxatives and diet pills, weight fluctuations (10-15 lb. range), has broken blood vessels, fasts, has mood swings, sore throat, fatigue, tooth decay, along with other symptoms.

Compulsive Overeating: This is characterized by uncontrollable eating and consequent weight gain. A person suffering from Compulsive Eating:

- Uses food to cope with stress, and daily problems
- Food can block out feelings and emotions
- Usually feels out of control
- Are aware their eating patterns are not normal
- Do recognize they have a problem
- Fat can also serve as a protective function (especially in people that have been victims of sexual abuse)
- Binge eaters may be depressed, may withdraw from activities, diets, feels tormented by eating habits, believe they will be a better person when thin.

What causes Eating Disorders?

The cause of eating disorders is not completely clear. There are many factors that can contribute to an eating disorder:

- Genetics, some personality types (OCD) may be more susceptible to eating disorders
- The media
- Overwhelming pressure for perfection
- High rates of stress at school or at home
- Certain sports or activities that require a certain body type or image
- The person may feel out of control, low self esteem/self image

What parents can do

To help prevent an eating disorder a parent can try to develop and maintain a healthy attitude about food and nutrition.

- Stay positive about your own body image
- Emphasize you love your child for who they are, not what they look like
- Emphasize health rather than weight
- Involve your child in preparation of healthy meals
- Make exercise fun. This is something a family can do together
- Know what the warning signs for an eating disorder are and be on the lookout

If you suspect your child has an eating disorder

- Express and explain your concern in a loving, supportive, non-threatening way
- Try to use “I” statements, not “you” statements in order to prevent the child from feeling that he/she is being attacked: “I imagine it must be stressful to count calories of everything you eat”
- Get your child to a medical professional for an assessment of your child in order to receive the needed help.

Resources:

Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, Inc. 1-800-931-2237

<http://www.mirror-mirror.org>

<http://www.something-fishy.org>

<http://www.familydoctor.org>

Books:

Eating Disorders: A Handbook for Teens, Families, and Teachers by Tania Heller
Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder by James Lock, Daniel LeGrange