



ED-1006-01-R11

# Eating Disorders Awareness: Eating Disorders Among Athletes

**S**ome athletes spend hours of intense training for their sport while practicing dangerous eating patterns in an attempt to lose weight. This practice often leads to eating disorders among athletes. This fact sheet will give signs and symptoms of eating disorders. Parents, coaches, and trainers need to recognize athletes with disordered eating patterns and refer them to appropriate resources.

Athletes at greatest risk include gymnasts, dancers, wrestlers, swimmers, figure skaters, and participants in any sport that emphasizes weight control. The eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are considered to be psychological and behavioral disorders that may develop into potentially life-threatening weight loss. Sometimes an eating disorder occurs along with such things as anxiety or pain and the eating disorder is used as a way to cope.

Females are most susceptible to eating disorders, which may be brought on by social pressure to be thin or parental pressure to succeed. Persons with eating disorders feel the need to gain control over their lives through dieting or refusing to eat.

## Signs and Symptoms

### *Anorexia*

- Significant weight loss
- Hyperactivity, depression, or moodiness

- Distorted body image (believe they are fat even when very thin)
- Loss of menstrual periods for at least three cycles
- Growth of fine, downy hair on body
- Feeling cold much of the time
- Excessive exercise
- Restricted food intake
- Obsessive-compulsive behavior

### *Bulimia*

- Consume large amounts of food within a specific time period, usually less than two hours
- Binges are followed by vomiting
- Secretly eating food
- Dependent on laxatives, diuretics or diet pills, excessive exercise
- Swollen salivary glands
- Dental problems caused by acid on teeth
- Feeling ashamed and depressed about eating habits

Even though these eating disorders are considered to be psychological and behavioral, if identified early, treatment is more easily handled. The athletes will give clues that a problem exists. Adults in charge need to keep their eyes and ears open to these clues.

Watch for the following clues to help you identify an eating disorder:

1. Hearing the athlete repeatedly express concerns about being overweight, when in fact his or her weight is below average.
2. The athlete expresses fears of becoming obese. These fears do not diminish, even after the athlete has lost weight.
3. Refusal by the athlete to maintain a minimal normal weight.
4. Observing the athlete consume large amounts of food and then promptly head to the bathroom. When the athlete returns, he or she continues to eat additional large portions of food. A pattern of this particular behavior indicates a problem might exist.
5. Bloodshot eyes, especially after the athlete has made a trip to the bathroom.
6. Wide fluctuations in weight over a short period of time.
7. The athlete may complain of lightheadedness or disequilibrium that cannot be accounted for by other medical causes.
8. The odor of vomit in the toilet, sink, shower, or wastebasket.
9. The athlete wears bulky clothes to hide thinness and complains of being cold.
10. The athlete may refuse to eat in public or with his or her friends.

If you are a parent or a coach who suspects an athlete is experiencing an eating disorder, express your concern to the individual very carefully. Do not accuse the athlete of being anorexic or bulimic.

Remember the disorder is more than an eating problem. Eating disorders generally reflect an inability to cope with life's day-to-day stresses. Instead, express concern about the athlete's health and energy. Do not discuss weight or eating habits.

Don't expect athletes to readily admit that they have an eating disorder, but be supportive, patient, consistent, and concerned. Listen to what they say with empathy and be able to offer a list of places and sources that can offer professional help.

Realize that you alone cannot solve the problems of eating disorders. It is a complex situation that has more to do with life than it has to do with food. Food just happens to be the factor the athlete is able to control. The athlete needs to be assured that there will be no criticism for admitting to an eating disorder. Patience is also a key word. The healing process may take a long time, but it can occur.

## Resources

- Clark, N. (1990). *Sports nutrition guidebook: Eating to fuel your active lifestyle*. Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics.
- Frissell, S., & Harney, P. (1998). *Eating disorders and weight control*. Springfield, N.J.: Enslow.
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- Smith, N. J., & Worthington-Roberts, B. (1989). *Food for sport*. Palo Alto, California: Bull Publishing.
- Thompson, C. (1996). *Athletes and eating disorders*. <http://www.mirror-mirror.org/athlete.htm>.

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