

Eating Disorders and Young People

There are a number of eating disorders, of which anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are the ones most people are familiar with.

These conditions are by and large, disorders which affect young women, although more young men are also starting to develop these problems. It is estimated that at any point in time, around 1-2% of young women in Australia have an eating disorder. However, although they may be relatively uncommon, the impact of these conditions on a young person's life can be quite profound. Indeed, eating disorders can become life-threatening illnesses. Early detection and effective treatment are therefore vital.

What to look for

Concerns about weight and appearance and poor eating habits are commonplace in our community. Numerous surveys have revealed that many young women go through periods of binge eating or forced weight loss. At times however, concerns about weight and appearance and inappropriate eating habits such as binge eating or dieting can become excessive and begin to affect a person's health and well-being. This is the stage at which an eating disorder is said to exist.

Types of eating disorder

Both anorexia and bulimia involve a preoccupation with body weight and control over eating and food. People with anorexia are determined to control the amount of food that they eat, whilst people with bulimia tend to feel out of control where food is concerned.

Anorexia

Anorexia nervosa is characterised by a:

- A refusal to eat enough food despite hunger, to maintain body weight of at least 85% of that expected for age and height
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight
- Distorted perceptions of body image, or undue influence of body weight/shape on self-evaluation, or a denial of serious weight loss
- Loss of normal menstrual periods

Young people with anorexia abstain from food and may exercise excessively. Some may also force themselves to vomit after eating, or use diuretics or laxatives to force their weight down.

Anorexia typically has a gradual onset and usually commences between 14-19 years of age. About 40% of people with anorexia will later develop bulimia.

Bulimia

Bulimia nervosa is characterised by:

- Frequent and recurrent episodes of binge eating, which involves consumption of excessive quantities of food (often calorie rich), during which the person feels a loss of control
- Frequent and recurrent attempts to compensate for the binges and avoid weight gain, through such things as self-induced vomiting, use of laxatives or diuretics, fasting, or excessive exercising
- Self-evaluation is unduly influenced by body shape and weight

A compulsive cycle of binge/purge/exercise/binge becomes established and the person feels out of control. A person with bulimia is usually within a healthy weight range and so their problem may be less obvious.

Complications

Eating disorders can lead to serious physical illness. Starvation or repeated cycles of binge eating and purging/fasting can lead to major metabolic and other chemical changes in the body and damage to vital organs.

Associated problems

Apart from the physical complication, young people with an eating disorder may have other mental disorders as well. For instance many people with eating disorders also suffer from depression.

What can be done?

Keeping the person safe is the first priority of treatment. If the weight loss is severe and serious health complications are apparent, then hospitalisation may be required.

Specific treatment for eating disorders consists of developing a good working relationship with the young person, providing them with information and explanation about eating disorders, restoring weight to a normal range, establishing healthy eating and activity regimes, monitoring of physical health, individual counselling and family work, and in certain cases, the use of medication. A team approach is often used.

What can you do?

Many young people experiencing an eating disorder, in particular anorexia, do not seek help on their own. Indeed, many will try to minimise or deny their problem and hide their problem from family and friends. Despite the secrecy, workers working with young people may be in a position to identify a young person with an

eating disorder and are well placed to assist the young person to get the help they need.

Advice and Referral

If you are working with a young person who you think may have an eating disorder and you are not sure what to do, it is always best to contact someone with experience in this field and discuss the situation with them.

Treatment of eating disorders should be carried out by workers with training and experience in dealing with mental health problems. Referral to a GP, a trained counsellor, or specialist mental health worker may be necessary.

Services at ORYGEN Youth Health

ORYGEN Youth Health is able to assist some young people (15-24) with eating disorders who live in Western or Northwestern Melbourne.

To make a referral or get some advice contact the ORYGEN Triage worker on 1800 888 320 or via the paging service on 03 9483 4556.

For children and teenagers under 15 years of age contact RCH Mental Health Service on 1800 445 511.

For further information regarding mental health and information in other languages visit:

- www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- www.sane.org.au
- www.healthinsite.gov.au