

Kids and Eating Disorders

Think back to the last time you watched TV. Did you see commercials for weight-loss programs? How about diet shakes? Low-fat dinners and low-fat candy bars? How about commercials for gyms, with skinny, sweaty people exercising?

All these commercials mean the same thing: Americans are very concerned about being thin. Lots of people we admire on TV or in the movies are thin: actors, actresses, supermodels, and musicians. It sometimes might even seem that thinner people have more glamorous lives. And we know that a person who is thin might live a longer and healthier life than someone who is overweight.

So being thin is great, right?

Not necessarily. If a person tries to become thin by consuming food in an unhealthy way, he or she has what's called an eating disorder. The definition of "thin" really changes for kids with eating disorders: they still feel fat no matter how little they weigh. Eating disorders are more common than you think: seven million Americans have them. One out of ten girls in college suffers from an eating disorder. And lots of famous people have had eating disorders, like Princess Diana, Ally Sheedy, and Paula Abdul.

Maybe you even know someone with an eating disorder - she's the girl who always says no to food, never eats at parties, and works out all the time. She's so thin that when she turns sideways, you think she left school early - but she still thinks she's fat. She just might be one of the one percent of American teenagers who has anorexia.

What is anorexia?

The full name for this illness is anorexia nervosa, and it's one kind of eating disorder. Anorexia happens mostly in girls and young women. When a girl has anorexia, she develops such an intense fear of being fat that she almost stops eating. She becomes obsessed with food, measuring it and weighing it. But she only eats it in very small amounts, and then exercises for hours every day to burn off the calories. She may become dangerously thin, but in her mind she is still "fat."

A person with anorexia weighs at least 15 percent less than the normal weight for her height. For example, one girl with anorexia whose correct weight (for her height) was 110 pounds went down to 80 pounds and another went down to 60 pounds from 100 pounds. Obviously, these girls were really thin, but they still saw themselves as overweight.

People with anorexia often suffer from depression or anxiety. Sometimes a girl with anorexia will begin to drink or use drugs. Anorexia is a difficult illness because it is not easily understood - no one really knows what causes it. To help someone with anorexia, psychological evaluation and treatment are usually necessary. Often, anorexia doesn't just exist by itself - it can be seen in combination with bulimia.

*Kids and Eating Disorders (continued)***What is bulimia?**

The full name for this illness is bulimia nervosa, and it's different from anorexia. Instead of starving themselves, kids with bulimia "binge and purge." This means eating a huge amount of food in two hours or less (like a gallon of ice cream, then a big bag of chips, then a box of cookies), then secretly trying to get rid of it by vomiting or taking laxatives.

Girls who have bulimia often feel depressed and helpless, and this secret bingeing and purging is one way they feel they have some control. Girls frequently become bulimic when they leave home for college or end a relationship. Kids with bulimia can sometimes be harder to spot than kids with anorexia, because their weight is often normal.

Can somebody "catch" an eating disorder?

People can't catch an eating disorder from someone the way you can catch a cold - eating disorders are not contagious. But the group of people one spends time with can make a big difference. If friends think the most important thing is to be thin, an individual may start to feel that way, too. And if someone wants to fit in and be thin, he or she might do some unhealthy things an individual wouldn't do otherwise - like not eating or vomiting.

What can happen physically?

Remember that a certain percentage of the body's weight has to be fat - someone can actually die if she doesn't weigh enough. And along the way, there are many other problems.

A girl with anorexia may damage her heart, liver, and kidneys by not eating. She may stop menstruating. Breathing, blood pressure, and pulse also may drop - this is the body's way of shifting into low gear to protect itself. Fingernails may snap off and hair may fall out, too. Anemia (this means that there is not enough iron in the blood), swollen joints, and light-headedness are also common. And in cold weather, girls with anorexia will feel much colder, since they don't have enough body fat to keep them warm. There are other complications, too.

For girls with bulimia, the most serious problem is that their purging means a loss of potassium - and this can lead to heart disease. They may also find their teeth starting to decay from the acids spit up during vomiting. Another problem is "chipmunk cheeks." This is when the cheek glands (called the parotid glands) actually expand from so much vomiting. People with bulimia may have constant stomach pain or damage to the stomach and kidneys. And like girls with anorexia, girls with bulimia may also stop menstruating.

*Kids and Eating Disorders (continued)***What can happen to social life?**

At the very least, kids with eating disorders are likely to miss out on a lot of good times. They can't get pizza with their friends, go for an ice-cream cone, or even enjoy their own birthday parties. Their eating disorders mean they become removed from lots of different social activities.

How can you tell it's happening?

If someone starts skipping meals or won't eat anything that has the slightest bit of sugar, fat, or calories, it's possible she may have an eating disorder.

Girls with anorexia will skip meals and avoid activities where food is present. They will also exercise constantly. Girls with bulimia may spend all their time planning their next binge, spending lots of money on food, and hiding in the bathroom for long periods of time after meals. All of these girls know that their behavior isn't "normal," and it makes them feel guilty and depressed. Sometimes they start abusing alcohol and drugs, and this makes them feel even worse.

How can someone get well?

A thorough physical examination and psychological examination are the primary steps in getting back to a healthy lifestyle and normal weight. It's important to take action as soon as possible, so abnormal eating patterns don't become harder and harder to change.

Since eating disorders involve the mind as well as the body, therapy is often divided up among medical, psychiatric, and nutritional counselors. The first step is to start eating regular meals, with no skipping. The next steps involve counseling and learning about nutrition. Therapy is a necessity for people with eating disorders, and group therapy or family therapy is often the most helpful type. Parents can be the key to their child's recovery - they have an important role in reassuring their child that her normal shape is a good one.

Eating disorders should never be ignored - they are dangerous and can do a lot of damage to the body. In some cases, they are even life-threatening. But with the proper treatment and support, they can be controlled and eliminated. It may take some time before a person with an eating disorder learns to live healthily, but with help, she will be able to look in the mirror and think, "I'm not too fat - I'm just right!"