

Do you have an eating problem?

Eating problems are common in college age women, although the incidence of eating disorders in men is rising steadily. In addition, while eating problems are more common in Euro-American women, they occur across race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and age.

Eating problems are patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that develop over time. They range from the more common problems of chronic dieting and compulsive eating to the more physically dangerous and debilitating eating disorders.

Signs and symptoms of eating problems

Anorexia

- very restricted eating or self starvation
- constantly thinking and worrying about food and weight
- feels best about self when not eating or eating very little
- intense fear of becoming fat
- may vomit, exercise intensively, use diuretics or laxatives
- plays with food, cuts food into little pieces
- absence of three or more menstrual periods
- feels “fat” when obviously underweight
- eating and exercise habits interfere with usual social activities
- loss of 15% total body weight

Physical symptoms:

- constipation
- lethargy and periods of hyperactivity
- hypersensitive to cold
- lanugo (fine, soft body hair)
- irritability, mood swings
- fainting spells, dizzy
- dry skin and hair; hair loss
- trouble concentrating on studies

Bulimia

- ashamed of body or hates body for being “too fat”
- cycles of binge eating followed by fasting, strict dieting,
- purging, or excessive exercise
- overeating characterized by eating large amounts of food rapidly in short period of time
- overeating feels uncontrollable
- avoids friends and family when feeling “fat”
- may use laxatives, diuretics, or diet pills
- secret eating

Physical symptoms:

- fatigue, fainting spells, moody
- tooth decay due to vomiting
- chronic bowel problems
- nausea, heartburn, stomachaches
- acne breakouts around mouth
- swollen glands behind jaw
- danger of stomach rupture
- weight fluctuations
- may have painful chest spasms
- danger of kidney failure due to loss of potassium from vomiting
- sore throat

Chronic dieting

- negative body image - feels “too fat”
- spends time worrying about food and weight
- constantly tries new diets
- feels like a failure when diets don’t work
- overeats and feels very guilty
- exercises to lose weight
- feels “good” only when dieting
- overeats under stress
- usually normal to overweight
- alternating cycles of eating/dieting

Compulsive eating

- feels “too fat”; has negative body image
- worries about weight and food most of the day
- overeats under stress or when upset
- diets occasionally, followed by overeating and guilt
- feels guilty and depressed about weight and overeating

Who develops eating problems?

The majority of those with eating problems are women, although the prevalence of eating problems in men is increasing. Young men who develop eating problems often have a history of childhood obesity and weight problems. Research has shown that gay men are particularly at risk for eating problems. Additionally, while research has shown that Euro-American heterosexual women are at a significant risk for eating problems, the development of eating problems among lesbians and women of color is on the rise. Finally, both men and women who compete in sports, particularly sports like gymnastics, wrestling, dancing, and running which require a certain weight or body ideal, are more at risk for developing eating problems.

How do eating problems develop?

Eating problems can develop in response to a combination of individual, interpersonal, family, and sociocultural factors. Eating problems often develop as a way to cope with depression, anxiety, stress, concerns about sexuality, feelings of inadequacy, and loneliness. Troubled family and personal relationships may also contribute to the development of eating problems. Finally, a variety of cultural factors provide a context for the development of eating problems. Women and girls are consistently taught from an early age that their self-worth is largely dependent on their physical appearance, and that their appearance must fit the ideal of Western culture. Yet the perfect, ideal woman seen in the media is usually young, White, heterosexual, tall, and thin, which is not at all representative of the general population. Only 5% of women in the United States have bodies which fit this ideal.

Do people recover from eating problems?

It is possible to recover from an eating disorder, but not until the problem is acknowledged and help is sought. Individuals with eating problems too often feel ashamed or abnormal because they feel “out of control” of such a “normal” part of human life - food. What people learn as they recover is that they have used food or they have tried to control their eating as a way of coping with difficulties in life which they felt unprepared to handle. Recovery is a process of both learning to eat and manage one’s weight, and of building self-esteem by learning to cope with life in more effective ways.

What help can you receive?

- Help is available in a variety of different settings on and off campus.
- Possible options include individual and group therapy, nutritional counseling, and medical evaluations.
- Self-help books and informational websites are a good way to start working on your own.

**Contact Counseling and Psychological Services (459-2628)
or the Student Health Center (459-2211)
for information about on-campus and off-campus
resources and referrals.**