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## **EATING DISORDERS – DISORDERED EATING IN SPORT**

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Disordered eating describes a wide variety of eating behaviours and/or patterns that are considered to be abnormal, such as Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa.

Dieting, binge-eating and food obsessions are not confined to the overweight population. They are also prevalent in normal weight and lightweight groups, athletes included.

Many athletes strive to be lighter than their natural weights, exercising excessively and eating sparsely to attain often-unrealistic weight goals. The dietary restrictions can lead to binges, and as the cycle deepens, food becomes the fattening enemy. Athletes suddenly forget that food contributes to good health, top performance and athletic longevity.

### **RISK FACTORS LEADING TO DISORDERED EATING PATTERNS**

- Dieting at a young age or to “make weight” in particular sports
- Personality factors – drive, perfectionism, determination, competitiveness
- Traumatic experiences with comments about weight
- Sudden increase in training
- Emotional circumstances

### **WARNING SIGNS**

Dieting, weight loss and pre event eating rituals do not necessarily mean that an athlete has an eating disorder but an athlete may show a number of signs and symptoms that are early warning signs of an eating disorder:

- Decreased performance
- Avoidance of social events with the team or friends
- Repeated comments about feeling or being fat
- Weight loss or maintenance of low body weight
- Low self-esteem
- Recurrent injuries, possibly from excessive exercise
- Decreased energy
- Wear bulky clothes to hide thinness
- Mood swings
- Depressive symptoms
- Complain of being cold
- Bloodshot eyes, swollen glands and bruised fingers (from inducing vomiting)
- After a meal, rushing to the bathroom, running water in an attempt to disguise the sound of vomiting

The health and performance related consequences of prolonged disordered eating are many but include inadequate nutrient and energy intake, increase bouts of illness, negative effects on internal organs and in severe cases be even life threatening. From just about any angle, inadequate food consumption is not a good thing!

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR CHILD HAS AN EATING DISORDER

### WHAT TO DO

- ❑ Approach them gently, but persistently, indicating your concern about their health and that you believe they have problems with food
  
- ❑ Be supportive and listen sympathetically
  
- ❑ Reinforce your concerns frequently and stress your belief in your child's ability to resolve the problem
  
- ❑ Contact your GP and ask for advice, including information on other organisations which can help you and your child

### WHAT NOT TO DO

- ❑ Don't discuss body weight or eating habits
  
- ❑ Don't expect them to confide in you immediately
  
- ❑ Don't dismiss warning signs
  
- ❑ Don't try to resolve the problem alone – seek professional help and support

Athletes are at increased risk of developing eating disorders. It is very important to be informed about expectations, performance demands and other factors that may place them at risk. This awareness can facilitate both early identification and treatment.

Coaches and parents need to understand that their opinions and remarks about body weight and size can strongly influence an athlete's eating behaviour. To comment on an athlete's body size or need for weight loss without offering guidance on how to healthfully meet desired goals may trigger the development of an eating problem in certain athletes who are eating disorder prone.

Remember, eating disorders are potentially life threatening and possible warning signs should not be ignored.