

Eating Disorder symptoms

There are a range of thoughts and behaviours that are part of an eating disorder – which can cause a range of physical and psychological outcomes. It is important to remember that all of the symptoms are neutral and can occur in the range of eating disorders.

Restriction. Disordered eating Starvation Syndrome

The effects of starvation on the human body are well documented. When starved of calories, the human body responds in a way known as “Starvation Syndrome”. People with Anorexia Nervosa suffer from starvation as a result of severely restricting their calorie intake. In Bulimia Nervosa, purging and restricting behaviour can also result in a depletion of caloric absorption, which can therefore lead to self-starvation.

The Minnesota Experiment

In the 1940s, there was an experiment involving a group of fit young men who had been drafted into the US army. They were conscientious objectors to military service and they had volunteered to be in a humanitarian programme.

The Minnesota Experiment required them to reduce their calorie intake by half. After six months of this planned starvation, the men experienced not only the expected physical changes, but mental changes too.

- Decrease in physical strength.
- Giddiness and momentary blackouts.
- Pale, cold, dry, and marked skin.
- Tiredness.
- Decrease in mental alertness.
- Hair that is thin, dry and/or falling out.
- Preoccupation with food, including persistent thoughts and dreams about food.
- Change in mealtime behaviours. This can include toying with food, or being ritualistic about the way in which food is eaten.
- Decrease in self-discipline.
- Decrease in comprehension.
- Loss in concentration.
- Apathy.
- Depression.
- A loss of ambition.
- Moodiness and irritability.

These symptoms are experienced by anyone who is starved of calories. *If you recognise these symptoms in your own life, it is important to remember that they all stem from one thing: starvation.*

Recovery from Starvation

The men in the Minnesota Experiment recovered from their physical and mental symptoms when they began to eat again. The physical and mental changes you have experienced will also be reversed when you increase your food intake and supply your body with the energy it needs. Through regular and healthy eating, your body can regain its strength and fight these symptoms of starvation. You may need to consult a medical practitioner or other health professional for support with this.

Excessive exercise

Healthy Exercise

Exercise is an important part of healthy living. A healthy level of exercise strengthens muscle and bones, improves cardiovascular fitness, and promotes psychological well being. Health professionals recommend that Australian adults exercise for 30 minutes most days, at a moderate intensity. Moderate intensity exercise includes activities such as walking. If extra fitness is required, vigorous exercise can be performed for 30 minutes, 3 to 4 days a week. Vigorous exercise includes activities such as playing a game of netball or tennis, or jogging.

Excessive Exercise: Dangerous Consequences

You may feel that because exercise is good for you, you cannot exercise too much. However, this is wrong. Exercising everyday for hours is not healthy for your body. Excessive exercising can lead to serious health effects including:

- Lowered hormones (menstrual dysfunction in women, sexual dysfunction in men)
- Osteoporosis
- Depression
- Heart problems
- Dehydration
- Permanent damage to joints and tendons

How Much is Too Much?

If you experience any of the symptoms below, you may be exercising at a level that is not healthy for your body:

- Exercising vigorously for over an hour every day, or more than once in a day.
- Feeling compelled to exercise, rather than exercising for enjoyment.
- Feeling guilty or anxious if you cannot exercise.
- Exercising despite injury, illness, or bad weather.
- Abandoning other commitments to make more time for exercise.
- Basing your self-worth on exercise.

How Much Exercise is Right for You?

If you currently suffer from an eating disorder, it may be hard for you to know how much exercise is appropriate for your circumstances. In general, here are some guidelines that you should follow in determining the amount of exercise that is right for you:

- If you are extremely underweight, with a BMI lower than 19, you should not be engaging in any exercise until you have regained weight. It is crucial for your health that you regain weight, and exercise may interfere with this goal.
- If you are overweight, low intensity exercise may be used as part of a weight management program.
- If you are not severely underweight, and have not received specific exercise guidelines from your clinician, a healthy level of exercise is recommended. This involves approximately 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise most days. If you enjoy more vigorous exercise, 30 minutes for 3 or 4 days a week is recommended.
- When you do exercise, make it social and make it fun!

Note: if you are underweight, or overweight, or purging regularly or suffer from dizziness, you should not engage in any exercise without first consulting your General Practitioner.

laxative misuse

Many people with eating disorders misuse laxatives. Some people use over 50 per day....but even if it's just 2 or 3, *any* quantity of laxatives used regularly because of weight/shape concerns is laxative misuse, because these drugs have harmful side-effects. Laxatives are even less effective than vomiting as a method for weight control.

Types of Laxatives

Laxative products work through different mechanisms. Some, especially those which contains senna, act as irritants to the lower gastro-intestinal (GI) tract, reducing the absorption of liquid. Others attract water so that the volume in the gut increases and the bowel swells. Others lubricate the GI tract and prevent water and vitamins being absorbed. They can be sold in pill form, in chocolate, or in herbal teas.

Dangers of Laxative Misuse

Laxatives disrupt normal bowel function

Symptoms include: loss of intestinal muscle tone, bloating, gas, colicky pain, appearance of mucus and blood in the stool, incontinence of faeces. In most people, these symptoms are reversible after stopping laxatives, but some permanent effects may occur.

Laxatives can cause electrolyte imbalance

Electrolytes are substances that regulate the transmission of nerve impulses, and a proper balance among the different electrolytes is crucial to many body functions. Too much potassium can be lost, which causes muscle weakness, numbness, paralysis, seizures and irregular heartbeat.

These effects can be fatal, with few warning signs, even in people who do not appear to be sick.

Myths About Laxatives

Myth 1: Large doses of laxatives will help me lose weight

People believe that laxatives prevent the absorption of food, thus preventing weight gain. They weigh themselves immediately after a bowel movement and see that the scale has gone down, and assume this is real weight loss...

Fact: Weight loss seen after using laxatives is due to fluid loss, and will be reversed after drinking fluids. Laxatives have a minimal effect on absorption of calories, thus hardly any effect on true weight loss. They work on the lower part of the bowel after absorption has happened higher up the GI tract.

Myth 2: I need laxatives for my constipation

Constipation is common in dieters and people with eating disorders. Prolonged constipation is uncomfortable physically and also psychologically – it can be upsetting to have a swollen abdomen and/or to weigh more (temporarily) because of retained waste.

Fact: Constipation in people with eating disorders occurs because there isn't enough food to move through the gut. The solution is increased and/or regular food intake, particularly of high-fibre foods, and increased fluid intake. Laxatives can make the problem worse, because after laxative use, the intestines have emptied and it's not possible for a normal bowel movement to occur for some days....so you get into a vicious cycle. Laxative abuse can also cause loss of intestinal muscle tone, so the bowels become dependent on these drugs.

Myth 3: I need laxatives to relieve my bloated feeling

People with eating disorders often feel full/bloated, with abdominal pain or swelling and wind. This is not only physically uncomfortable but psychologically distressing, as the symptoms can cause the abdomen to seem larger.

Fact: There is some basis for these physical symptoms -many people with eating disorders experience delayed gastric emptying (slowness of the stomach in passing food into the small intestine). This is caused by not eating enough. And laxatives actually increase swelling, pain and gas formation. The symptoms gradually disappear as eating returns to normal.

How to Stop Laxative Abuse

- Laxatives can be stopped abruptly. You may experience constipation and it will take some time for normal bowel function to return, but with adequate food intake, it should not take long. Your GP may prescribe bulk-forming or stool-softening products on a temporary basis.
- You don't need alternative methods of regulating bowel function – such as herbal products that regulate bowel function (these are also laxatives) or enemas.
- You may have temporary weight gain during laxative withdrawal. Don't panic – it is only temporary water retention, while your body overcompensates for the dehydration caused by laxatives. And remember that laxatives weren't helping you to control your weight - it just seemed like it. Don't start another vicious cycle by turning to food restriction or vomiting.

vomiting and your health

If you look back on when you started vomiting, you probably only did it occasionally, to regain control over breaking your diet or eating more than you'd planned. Once you'd got over the discomfort and revulsion, you probably began thinking of it as a "safety net", to use whenever you ate the wrong foods or ate too much. You may have believed that, as long as you could vomit soon after eating, you were able to get rid of the calories you'd eaten. And you may have thought that, since you were going to vomit anyway, you might as well eat as much as you could. Also, you probably found that it was easier to vomit with a full stomach...Or maybe you started thinking that if you vomited after eating anything at all, not even a "binge", you could lose weight....so that eating or eating too much was OK, it was safe..... At this point vomiting became a HABIT and part of a vicious cycle of (binge) eating and purging.

Dangers of Chronic Vomiting

- Chronic vomiting can result in erosion of tooth enamel – in some cases, teeth will need to be replaced (see handout *Vomiting & Dental Care*)
- The parotid glands (salivary glands) can swell up and cause "chipmunk face".
- Tearing and bleeding of the oesophagus can occur.
- Electrolyte imbalance can result in seizures, cardiac arrest and even death.
- Chronic vomiting can result in a disruption of your digestive system so that even small amounts of food in your stomach can leave you feeling uncomfortable and trigger the urge to vomit.
- Apart from encouraging overeating and distorting your ability to discriminate hunger and fullness, there are a number of psychological consequences to vomiting. You feel guilt, shame, anxiety and depression, which can make you feel worthless and out of control – and these feelings can trigger a binge. So you end up binge eating in response to the shame about vomiting – which means additional vomiting. It's the vicious cycle once again.

Myths About Vomiting

Myth1. Vomiting will prevent weight gain

This vomiting began as a way of dealing with and reducing the consequences of overeating (weight gain), and perhaps the negative emotions that often accompany a binge, or trigger it....

Fact: vomiting tends to ENCOURAGE overeating and weight gain.

You have a false sense of security of vomiting as a way out, because in reality it can lead to larger binges and weight gain – which is what you're trying to avoid. One study showed that women who vomited after a binge weighed more than women who just binged... sound impossible? But, for those of you who binge, look at the amount and type of foods that you binge on now, compared to when you first started vomiting – you'll realise you're eating a lot more now. You can do this because, you think, you have vomiting as a way out, to "wipe the slate clean".

Myth 2: Vomiting gets rid of the calories I've consumed

Most people with bulimia are of average weight. They tend to binge and then they restrict food intake for the rest of the day. So if you're hardly eating apart from your binge, why aren't you losing weight? Obviously, you're retaining enough calories from binges to maintain your weight.

Fact: Research has shown that, contrary to popular belief, vomiting does NOT get rid of all the calories ingested, even when done immediately after eating.

Even the most successful vomiter will only be able to purge 60% of calories eaten...which means that you're probably only vomiting up 30% of calories most of the time. Think about it – if you binge on 2,000 calories and vomit up 30%...which is 600 calories...this means that you're absorbing 1,400 calories from your binge, even with your vomiting. This is because absorption begins in the mouth, continues in the oesophagus, and then in the stomach...so even if you vomit up all the contents of your stomach, many of the calories will have already been absorbed.

Adapted from: Centre for Clinical Interventions

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See website www.cci.health.wa.gov.au for more handouts and resources.