

# Eating Disorders

## Introduction

It has been estimated that more than 10 million Americans currently are affected by serious eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. While anyone can suffer from an eating disorder, they are most common in teen and young adult women. Eating disorders can have a large negative impact on an individual's quality of life. Self-image, relationships with families and friends as well as performance in school or on the job can be damaged. It is critical for anyone with symptoms of an eating disorder to seek professional help since an individual can die from the medical complications these disorders can cause.

## Types of Eating Disorders

**Anorexia** typically involves an extreme fear of gaining weight or a dread of becoming fat. Even though these individuals may be very thin or even extremely underweight, they see themselves as “fat.” They may attempt to reach or maintain what they think is their perfect body weight by literally starving themselves. They may also exercise excessively. Others may eat excessive amounts of food in one sitting and then attempt to get rid of the food and calories from their bodies by forcing themselves to “throw up” or by the misuse of laxatives or enemas.

**Bulimia** also includes the fears of being overweight. But it also includes hidden periods of overeating (binge eating) which may occur several times a week or even several times a day. While overeating, individuals may feel completely out of control. They may gulp down thousands of calories often high in carbohydrates and fat – in amounts of food that would be greater than what an average person would eat at one sitting. After they overeat, the individuals try to “undo” the fact that they ate too much as quickly as possible by forcing themselves to “throw up” or by the misuse of laxatives or enemas. This is often referred to as “bingeing and purging.”

**Binge Eating or Compulsive Overeating** may affect almost as many men as women. In the past, these individuals were sometimes described as “food addicts.” They overeat (binge eat) as noted in bulimia above, but do not regularly try to get rid of the food immediately by throwing up or by misusing laxatives or enemas. Feelings of guilt may make it easier for the person to overeat again.

## Symptoms

Each of these eating disorders can rob the body of adequate minerals, vitamins, proteins and other nutrients needed for good health. Individuals with eating disorders can display a number of symptoms including dramatic loss of weight, secretive eating patterns, hair loss, feeling cold, constipation and, for women, the loss of their monthly menstrual period. Eating disorders may also cause numerous other physical health complications, such as heart conditions or kidney failure, which can lead to death.

Eating disorders can also affect oral health. Without the proper nutrition, gums and other soft tissue inside your mouth may bleed easily. The glands that produce saliva may swell. Individuals may experience

chronic dry mouth. Throwing up frequently can affect teeth, too. When strong stomach acid repeatedly flows over teeth, the tooth's outer covering (enamel) can be lost to the point that the teeth change in color, shape and length. The edges of teeth become thin and break off easily. Eating hot or cold food or drink may become uncomfortable.

## Photographs



*Photos courtesy of Craig Mabrito, D.D.S.*

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## Prevention

Eating disorders arise from a variety of physical, emotional and social issues all of which need to be addressed to help prevent and treat these disorders. Family and friends can help by setting good examples about eating and offering positive comments about healthy eating practices. While eating disorders appear to focus on body image, food and weight, they are often related to many other issues. Referral to health professionals and encouragement to seek treatment is critical as early diagnosis and intervention greatly improve the opportunities for recovery.

## Treatment of Oral Health Consequences of Eating Disorders

- Maintain meticulous oral health care related to toothbrushing and flossing.
- Immediately after throwing up, do NOT brush but rinse with baking soda to help neutralize the effects of the stomach acid.
- Consult with your dentist about your specific treatment needs.
- See your dentist regularly.