

EVER
WONDER
ABOUT...?
TOPICS IN NUTRITION

WHEN FOOD BECOMES MORE THAN SOMETHING TO EAT

American society seems to be obsessed with appearance – and particularly with body shape and size. It's hard not to be with what we see every day. TV programs feature good-looking, lean females and males. High-fashion models—tall, skinny and beautiful—are plastered in every magazine we look at. Sports figures, who are often thought of as role models and stars, are often extremely muscular and well-proportioned. And then there are the advertisements, which tell us that we, too, can have the “perfect” body if we would just “use this, drink this, eat this, read this, buy this, send for this...”

This image of the “perfect” body ignores the fact that human beings come in a wide variety of sizes and shapes. It ignores the fact that gaining weight and changing body shape are normal and healthy for teenagers. Yet the images on television, in movies and in magazines can lead young people to believe that any body size or shape that is “less-than-ideal” is unacceptable.

This obsession with the ideal body sometimes motivates young people to take drastic steps; they overly restrict their calorie intake; they vomit or abuse laxatives; they take dangerous drugs; or they exercise obsessively—all to the point that they damage their health. Many researchers believe that as a result of striving to attain society's ideals, some young people develop eating disorders.

Anorexia Nervosa

People with the eating disorder called anorexia nervosa severely limit their food intake. People with this eating disorder say they feel fat, even if they weigh much less than is normal or healthy. The picture of themselves they see in the mirror is often very different from what the rest of the world sees. Anorexics are obsessed with food, weight and body image. They often count calories, weigh themselves many times a day and exercise excessively. They feel uncomfortable after eating even the smallest of meals.

Anorexics are literally starving themselves – sometimes, to death. During periods of extreme weight loss, the body responds by slowing down certain body functions (e.g., body temperature falls, blood pressure drops). Changes occur in the skin, hair and nails. Extreme losses of body fat make sitting or lying down uncomfortable, so resting and sleeping are difficult.

Bulimia

People with the eating disorder called bulimia alternate between eating larger amounts of food than is “normal” (e.g. an entire chocolate cake) then trying to get rid of the food by vomiting or using laxatives. Between these “binges,” bulimics may eat normally.

Like anorexia nervosa, bulimia is also characterized by an obsession with weight and body image. Bulimics may not look excessively overweight or underweight but they are harming their bodies. Repeated vomiting damages the stomach and it can erode the teeth. It can upset the body's chemical balance which can lead to fatigue or heart irregularities.

Causes and cures

The reasons for these life-threatening eating disorders are not completely clear. It seems that many young people with these disorders think: “If I am thin, I will be happy, popular, successful.” Thus they may go on strict diets to help them feel in control of something in their lives.

We know that obesity, being extremely overweight, is not healthy; but neither is being too thin. And thinness and weight loss are not the solutions for other problems in life.

Most people find it difficult to stop their anorectic or bulimic behavior without professional help. Getting that help is important because if untreated, the disorders can lead to serious health problems and even to death. If you have a friend you think might have an eating disorder, encourage them to get help.



Each of us is unique yet there is a feeling in our society that a “perfect body image” really does exist. Why do you think that occurs? How could the search for an “ideal body image” lead to an eating disorder?