

Vol 2, Issue 8: Disordered Eating in Athletes

Disordered Eating in Athletes

The image of the athlete is pervasive in our society...strong, muscular, attractive...the epitome of good health and nutrition? Unfortunately, image is not always everything nor is it always accurate. Athletes, particularly female, experience the same general social and familial pressures that non-athletes do regarding body, weight, diet, and self-worth. And, when combined with sport-specific pressures, such as expectations from teammates and coaches, judging criteria, and having to wear revealing athletic attire, athletes are an at-risk group for disordered eating problems.

Disordered eating may range from diagnosable problems such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa to subclinical problems, such as excessive exercising, dieting, or binge eating. Whatever the level, such problems are often associated with other psychological complications, such as:

- feeling sad or depressed
- not feeling good about oneself or one's performances
- being dissatisfied with the size and shape of one's body
- feeling out of control in their lives
- experiencing high levels of anxiety
- holding themselves and their performances to unreachable standards of perfection

As a result, it is important to identify early on athletes who might be struggling with disordered eating problems. Although it can be hard to distinguish between a focused, hardworking athlete and a person with an eating related problem, coaches, parents and athletes can look for the following signs as indicators that a problem may exist:

- avoiding eating or secretive eating
- more than normal fluctuations in weight
- tired and stressed most of the time
- sad or depressed
- social withdrawal
- exercising beyond what is needed for sport training

-overconcern about gaining weight or what their body looks like

-use of diet pills, diuretics, laxatives

-going to the bathroom frequently after eating

In addition to early identification, coaches and parents can help by creating healthier environments in which athletes can train and compete:

-deemphasize weight, focus on health and fitness

-emphasize eating to maximize performance, not reaching a certain weight

-avoid linking weight loss to enhanced performance or appearance

-do not weigh athletes, except if medically necessary, and then weighing should only be done by sportsmedicine personnel

-demonstrate, yourself, healthy eating behaviors, moderate physical activity, and a positive body image

-if eating related problems are suspected, talk directly with the athlete. Emphasize your concern for his or her well-being (don't focus on weight) and assist athletes in seeking treatment

At the Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence we have a staff of consultants who understand the pressures that athletes experience regarding their bodies, their weight, and their performances. For more information about our services and how we can work with you and/or your team, contact us at (940) 369-SPORT (7767). Or you can visit our website and send us an email at www.sportpsych.unt.edu In closing, we leave you with the sport quote of the week:

"If you don't do what's best for your body, you're the one who comes up on the short end."
Julius Erving (Dr. J), Basketball Hall of Fame