

HEALTH PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM EATING DISORDERS



EATING DISORDERS & THEIR MANY AFFECTS

- » Emotional symptoms like anxiety, depression, hopelessness and low self esteem.
- » Psychological symptoms, such as constant thoughts about food, weight, shape and exercise that put strain on relationships.
- » Physical problems which can lead to serious illness and even death.

This resource provides information about the physical problems that may result from eating disorders.

HEALTH PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM LOW BODY WEIGHT

By restricting food intake, and often other means too, many people with eating disorders maintain their body weight well below the healthy normal range. The body will react to this state of semi-starvation in various ways. Most problems are reversible, but only with adequate food intake and restoring a healthy body weight. Nutritional supplements such as vitamin tablets can never make up for inadequate food intake.

Low body weight may lead to:

- » Slowing of the heart rate and low blood pressure. You may feel tired, faint, dizzy and have heart palpitations.
- » You may feel cold even in warm surroundings.
- » Irregular or absent menstrual periods and infertility.
- » Growth is delayed in children and adolescents.
- » Men may suffer with impotence.
- » Thinning and weakening of muscles which can cause collapse.
- » Inadequate food intake affects the digestive system. Little food and fluid passing through the body results in constipation.
- » Small quantities of food may leave one feeling bloated and uncomfortable.
- » Skin can become dry and may develop fine downy hair.
- » Hair too may become thin and dry.
- » Some people with low body weight develop oedema (fluid retention usually in the ankles leading to swelling and puffiness). The excess fluid may disguise the true extent of loss of body mass.

HEALTH PROBLEMS CAUSED BY REPEATED VOMITING

Many people with eating disorders make themselves vomit. This can become frequent and habitual, and difficult to change. As well as getting rid of food and controlling body weight, vomiting may come to be a means of dealing with distressing feelings, or become a kind of self-punishment. With binge eating it may form a vicious circle, each problem reinforcing the other and making change still harder.

- » When the stomach suddenly contracts to vomit, around 50% of its contents is pushed further down into the intestine where it will be digested and absorbed. Only half the food is expelled.
- » Vomiting causes a loss of essential minerals. These make up the acidic stomach fluid important for the digestion of food. The most important mineral to be depleted is potassium, but others include phosphate, calcium, zinc and magnesium.
- » When potassium levels in the body fall, the heart may lose its regular beating rhythm. This may cause faintness or even loss of consciousness. Occasionally the heart may stop beating altogether.
- » Low potassium can in time lead to kidney disease.
- » Frequent vomiting is likely to cause dehydration, bringing faintness, tiredness and headaches.
- » Acidic stomach fluid in the mouth erodes dental enamel. Dentists advise against brushing teeth straight after vomiting, as this worsens the acid damage. Rinsing with water is recommended.
- » In reaction to frequent vomiting, the saliva glands in the cheeks may enlarge, giving the face a swollen appearance.
- » Frequent vomiting also results in damage and bleeding of the gullet, which may cause pain, blood loss, and anaemia.
- » Some people with low body weight develop oedema (fluid retention usually in the ankles leading to swelling and puffiness). The excess fluid may disguise the true extent of loss of body mass.



HEALTH PROBLEMS CAUSED BY EXCESSIVE LAXATIVE USE

Laxative misuse (taking it in an excessive dose) is a method people may use to try to get rid of food and reduce their body weight. They may observe their weight has decreased when they get on the scales after laxative misuse and subsequent diarrhoea. But any such weight loss is due entirely to a loss of body fluid (water and minerals). There is no loss of body tissue mass, fat, protein or calories.

Laxative misuse can cause:

- » dehydration, bringing faintness, tiredness and headaches.
- » severe depletion of essential minerals, which are present in the fluid within the bowel e.g. potassium.
- » oedema (fluid retention usually in the ankles leading to swelling and puffiness). The excess fluid may disguise the true extent of loss of body mass.
- » loss of bowel tone, the muscle wall becoming thinned and flaccid. At this stage bowel function may be permanently weakened and slow, and even the presence of adequate food and fluid cannot restore it to normal.
- » severe and long term constipation, which will not respond to more laxative medication.

Repeated vomiting, laxative misuse, and misuse of diuretics (water tablets) each lead to significant mineral and fluid loss including potassium. In combination, these behaviours are particularly risky.

HEALTH PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM MENSTRUAL DISTURBANCE

- » At low weight, the body's normal sex hormones stop being produced.
- » In children and adolescents, the changes of puberty cannot occur without sex hormones and growth may be permanently stunted.
- » In a woman, menstrual periods become irregular or stop altogether and she becomes infertile.
- » In men too sexual function is disturbed, leading to impotence.
- » In older women who have experienced menopause, low weight patients have an ever-increasing risk of osteoporosis - a softening of the bones which increases risk of fracture. Whereas most health problems resulting from eating disorders can recover quickly, osteoporosis may remain long after eating is resumed and healthy body weight restored.

On recovery from eating disorder, when you are again eating enough food and maintaining a healthy body weight, it may take some months for regular menstrual periods to return. Absent or irregular periods are no guarantee against getting pregnant. You should take precautions to avoid an unwanted pregnancy.

WHAT SORT OF SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

It is usually very difficult for people with eating disorders to get better on their own. It is important that you find professional help and support as soon as possible.

- » Visit your GP to discuss options.
- » Visit our website: www.swedauk.org.
- » Visit national charity Beat Eating Disorders' website: www.b-eat.co.uk.
- » Join a local Support group - look online for their availability in your area and at **SWEDA** if you are based in the south west.
- » Read up on information on how to help someone with an eating disorder.

WHAT SUPPORT CAN SWEDA PROVIDE?

At **SWEDA** we recognise the difficulties in seeking help that anyone struggling with an eating disorder will experience. It is our hope that in doing so we can enable anyone to feel able to seek help. We can offer you:

- » a Self-help Support Group.
- » 1-2-1 counselling.
- » Support and Guidance Sessions.
- » access to information on our website www.swedauk.org.

