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Health & Wellbeing Bulletin

Eating Disorders

Many of us are unhappy with our weight at some point in our life. You may think you're overweight, underweight, or that you have a strange body shape. Perhaps you have decided to eat healthier foods, or become a vegetarian. These thoughts often come and go, but sometimes eating habits can affect your life.

Eating disorders are most common in women aged 15 to 25, but people of all ages can be affected. If you have an eating disorder you may eat too much food, too little food, or use harmful ways to reduce your calorie intake. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are the most common eating disorders.

Anorexia nervosa

People with anorexia have an intense fear of putting on weight. If you have anorexia, you will restrict the amount of food you eat to reduce your body weight to an unhealthy level. You believe you're fat, even though you're underweight. You may exercise excessively, take laxatives, or make yourself vomit to avoid putting on weight.

Anorexia can cause a number of health problems. If you have anorexia you may:

- stop having periods
- feel tired and cold all the time
- have constipation and abdominal pain
- feel dizzy or faint
- have fine, downy hair on your body
- have dry and yellowish skin

If you make yourself vomit, over time the enamel on your teeth will wear away. Using laxatives frequently can cause stomach pain and you may find that you can't go to the toilet without them.

Bulimia nervosa

People with bulimia usually have a stable body weight, but some suffer from weight swings. If you have bulimia, you worry about putting on weight. You eat large amounts of food at once and then feel guilty for overeating. This is known as bingeing. You then find ways to try and get rid of the food, known as purging. This can be by vomiting, taking laxatives or through excessive exercise.

Over time, bulimia can lead to a number of health problems. These can include:

- sore throat
- tooth decay
- bad breath
- irregular periods
- heartburn
- a puffy face from swollen salivary glands
- dry skin because of dehydration
- heart and kidney disease

Where can I get help?

It's very important that you get help for an eating disorder. The first step is to visit your GP. He or she will ask you about your eating habits and examine you to check for any physical problems resulting from the eating disorder.

Your GP may refer you to a psychiatrist or psychologist who is trained in the treatment of eating disorders.

There are a number of self-help books available for eating disorders. You can use the books on your own or with a therapist. You will develop skills to help manage your eating disorder.

Support groups can be helpful. Talking to other people with eating disorders can be comforting and can help you on the road to recovery.

Treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT) are frequently used to treat eating disorders. CBT helps you to look at your thoughts and feelings in detail and find a solution to your problems. IPT allows you to think about your relationships with other people. Rebuilding these relationships can help you stop turning to food when you're feeling unhappy.

For further information on QUINN-healthcare's Health@Work Services please call 1890 907 088 or email och@quinn-healthcare.com

What causes eating disorders?

There are normally several reasons why people develop eating disorders. It's likely to be a combination of feelings, pressures or changes in your life that make you very unhappy. These include physical or sexual abuse, long-term illness, the death of someone close to you, or family problems.

You may feel that your weight is the only part of your life that you have control over. If you have low-self esteem or depression, an eating disorder may give you a sense of control and achievement.

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