



Protecting Athletes From Disordered

What is disordered eating?

For an athlete, disordered eating can often start with the belief that only one body size is acceptable for a chosen sport. This belief may cause the athlete to want to "lose a few pounds" to improve performance, or follow a strict exercise or eating regimen to maintain current body size. Disordered eating can be identified when an athlete develops eating and/or exercise habits that are harmful to her well-being, such as being very concerned with the fat and calorie content of food, skipping meals, cutting out certain foods, or exercising to "burn-off" calories to make a body look a certain way. In more extreme cases, this obsession with losing weight or "maintaining" a certain body size may lead to an eating disorder (anorexia, bulimia, or binge-eating).

Is disordered eating just about food?

Although food or body weight may appear to be the main issue, an athlete with disordered eating may be using disordered eating as a way to cope with other issues or pressures in life that the individual is not yet ready to face in a healthy or direct way.

What causes disordered eating?

There is no single cause for disordered eating – many things can make a person vulnerable and sensitive to developing disordered eating. We call these things stressors. Below are some examples of stressors that experts believe may increase an athlete's risk for developing disordered eating:

- **diETING to lose weight;**
- **low self-esteem and/or compares herself to others;**
- **linking self-worth with body weight and shape;**
- **a large natural body size and shape;**
- **poor coping skills for dealing with stress, conflict, or emotions;**
- **negative media images and role models in the area of body weight and shape;**
- **history of sexual abuse, trauma, or violence;**
- **changes in life situations- like puberty, a new school, or parents getting divorced over--concern or teasing about weight and shape in the school and in the family;**
- **unrealistic expectations of body weight and shape in sport or other activities.**

Why is it important to be aware of disordered eating in sport?

Simply put- athletes are under more pressure than non-athletes in the area of body weight and shape. In addition to the harmful messages that many girls and women receive about how their bodies should look, athletes in some sports must also deal with the weight or aesthetic demands that go along with their participation. Athletes sometimes get the message that only certain body sizes and shapes are acceptable for their sport, whether that means being assigned to a certain weight category or having to wear clothing that emphasizes their body shape.

Who is at risk?

According to research, anywhere from 15% to 62% of female athletes deal with disordered eating. Although these numbers represent athletes in a variety of sports, some sports have been shown to have higher rates of disordered eating, and therefore, athletes participating in those sports may be at a higher risk:



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- **Weight-class sports:** boxing, wrestling, martial arts, rowing, equestrian events, sailing
- **Endurance sports:** distance running, cycling, triathlon, swimming, cross-country skiing
- **Aesthetic-component sports:** synchronized swimming, gymnastics, figure skating, dance, diving, cheerleading
- **Body Emphasis (non-judged):** volleyball (beach and indoor), swimming, athletics (track), tennis, ski jumping

Note : It is important to remember that these sports do not cause disordered eating! Disordered eating can affect athletes in ANY sport where the conditions do not mix well with the individual athlete's life circumstances or attitudes towards food, weight, body image and sport.

How do I know if an athlete has disordered eating?

It can sometimes be difficult to tell if an athlete has disordered eating because many of the characteristics of an athlete with disordered eating are the same as what some people perceive to be the characteristics of a "good" athlete. As coaches, parents and sport staff, we can use caution in the attitudes and behaviours we encourage and celebrate in our athletes. If you do suspect one of your athletes may have disordered eating patterns, consider discussing your concerns with the athlete directly as well as with their parents. Seeking professional medical support is another option to consider, and can also be discussed with the athlete and her family.

General characteristic of a person with disordered eating an athlete with disordered eating may . . .

- a perfectionist with high goals
- train harder and longer than her teammates to perfect her skills
- ignores their body's signals for hunger, pain, or fear
- train and perform through pain and injury to meet her goals
- strong desire to please others
- always comply with instructions to please her coach and is
- selflessly committed to her team
- convinced that their weight or physical appearance determine their worth as a person
- be convinced that sport performance determines worth as a person, and so the athlete tries to change their body to succeed at sport

(Adapted from materials created by Dr. Ron Thompson and Dr. Roberta Trattner Sherman, International Academy of Eating Disorders Conference, 2000; see also Thompson, Ron A., & Trattner Sherman, Roberta (1993). Helping Athletes with Eating Disorders. Champaign, IL Human Kinetics). Edited by Ginger Howell.

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