



Students' eating disorders can cause serious problems

Thousands of teens are entering high school or college this month. And no doubt, parents throughout the nation are having the same "watch-out for this and that" type of conversations with their nearly grown children. The issues discussed likely include drugs and alcohol, being savvy about proper sexual behavior, and so on.

We doubt, however, that many parents are broaching the subject of eating disorders or of avoiding the types of disordered eating that can lead to long-term health problems related to bad eating habits.

Research indicates that eating disorders affect high proportions of college students, with estimates ranging from 10 to 30 percent of female college students and to a somewhat lesser extent in males.

It is now clear that parents should discuss this topic with their children.

Body weight concerns

All types of eating disorders seem to stem from extreme concern with body weight and great fear of gaining any body fat.

Anorexia nervosa is characterized primarily by starving behaviors that lead to extremely low body weight.

Bulimia nervosa includes a combination of binge eating and subsequent attempts to rid the body of the food. This includes vomiting, laxative abuse or excessive exer-

cise to burn off the extra calories.

Some people primarily binge without purging. This behavior is simply called binge eating syndrome.

Although these disorders occur much more often in women than men, a lesser known condition, sometimes called "big syndrome," is much more common in males. This condition is characterized by an intense fear of being too small. The fear translates into an obsession with muscle-building exercises and extreme dietary habits.

All of these disorders are characterized by the fact that eating and body image take on disproportionate emphasis in a person's life.

Without a doubt this can adversely affect virtually all aspects of life, especially the ability to stay focused on the educational experience.

Both females and males want to be attractive as they develop their self image as adults. This can be difficult while trying to balance societal image pressures with their own self-awareness.

There are many possible triggers for eating disorders. Today's advertisements showcase bodies that most could achieve only through abnormal eating, extreme exercise and severe plastic surgery. The very tall, thin, long-legged "Barbie Doll" look blatantly tells girls to aspire to a virtually impossible

appearance.

Males are also seduced

Males also are being seduced to alter their appearance to gain self-esteem. They want to look like male models who have combined their genetic good looks with years of working out in gyms.

Peer pressure also plays a big role in what is considered acceptable appearance. A simple comment about excess weight can trigger abnormal eating patterns.

At the other extreme, many students believe education and social life are far more important than taking the time to eat right. This can result in fast foods and convenience snack foods making up most of their diets. Bottom line: inadequate basic nutrients, excess calories and body fat gain.

As clothes become tight, self-image goes down. Abnormal eating habits are triggered to shed pounds too quickly, leading to the first steps of a life of yo-yo dieting or other disordered eating behaviors. Such behaviors can be difficult to reverse and can result in a reduced ability to focus, concentrate, and learn.

Don't be afraid to ask your children about their eating habits and self-esteem. Preventing an eating disorder is much easier than treating one.

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
