



Extremes in calorie control plague nation

As the nation focuses on the escalating problem of obesity, a growing number of young people are being pressured into the opposite problem: excessive thinness associated with eating disorders. With summer just around the corner, the pressure to be thin is stronger and more subversive than ever.

Question: How can you tell if adolescents or teenagers are being seduced by the "thinness idol" or if they are just pencil thin because they are growing so quickly?

Answer: Eating disorders frequently start with a disordered eating pattern that excludes various foods perceived as fattening or "bad for you." People avoid foods for many reasons that have to do with familiarity and flavor preferences, but if someone is becoming an excessively picky eater, it can be a red flag for a developing problem.

Q: Could a teenager who binges on snack foods still have an eating disorder?

A: Absolutely. A person who only eats snack foods may limit calories and lose weight but be seriously deficient in many required nutrients. Many young girls already have calorie databases in their minds. They can tell you the amount of calories in everything they eat and maintain an excessively low body weight. But this is accomplished at the expense of long-term health.

Q: Can someone be too concerned about "healthy eating"?

A: Yes. Fear of foods in the name of health or weight control creates a variety of eating problems. Too often, people consider "healthy eating" to mean avoiding many foods. Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and drinking lots of water is great, but not at the exclusion of foods such as grain products and good sources of protein and calcium.

Q: Do many athletes have eating disorders?

A: When there is even a slight possibility (perceived or

real) to enhance performance by losing a pound or two, competitive minds can take this to the extremes that become eating disorders. Eating disorders appear to be growing increasingly common among athletes.

Q: Can restricted eating during youth lead to obesity in later years?

A: Yes. Research shows that the longer a person follows overly restricted calorie intake, the more the mind becomes obsessed with food. Combine this mental state with a body that has adapted physiologically by reducing its calorie needs, and you have created the conditions for the pounds to keep creeping up.

Extreme fear of fat and food can create extreme health problems. Since people with disordered eating may not be thinking clearly, it is essential for parents and friends to help them move toward a focus on fitness and eating a reasonable variety of wholesome foods.

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