Disordered Eating

The term “disordered eating” refers to a wide range of behaviors. The four main types of behaviours are: restrictive eating, binge eating, purging, and compulsive exercise.

**Restrictive Eating**

Restrictive eating most often refers to restriction of caloric intake. This may occur by fasting, skipping meals, or consuming very small portions and/or low-calorie foods at mealtimes. However, restriction can come in other forms, including restriction of carbohydrate, fat and/or protein intake or consumption of a very limited variety of foods. Replacement of food with nutritional supplements and adherence to “fad diets” may also be considered forms of restrictive eating.

**Binge Eating**

An episode of binge eating is characterized by both of the following:

1. Eating an amount of food that is definitely larger than most individuals would eat during a similar period of time and under similar circumstances;
2. A sense of lack of control over eating during the episode.¹

**Purging**

Purging refers to inappropriate compensatory behaviours used to prevent or reverse the effects of putting food into the body. It includes self-induced vomiting and misuse of laxatives, diuretics, enemas, and/or other medications.

**Compulsive Exercise**

Compulsive exercise, like purging, can be a compensatory behavior used to prevent or reverse the effects of putting food into the body. It can also reflect an intense desire to build muscle. In either case, there is a compulsion to exercise for longer and more vigorously than what is considered “normal.” A person may start off with normal, good intentions to be fit and healthy, but the number of, and intensity of exercise sessions gradually increases until they develop a dependency on exercising. As things get out of control, exercise becomes not so much a choice anymore, as it is a need.²
Some people engage in only one type of disordered eating behavior. Others engage in a combination of behaviours. Some people engage in disordered eating only periodically. For others, disordered eating is a part of daily life. However, all disordered eating – regardless of form or severity – is a cause for concern.

**Signs of Disordered Eating**
- Increased isolation from friends and family
- Eating or not eating as a response to emotions
- Increased irritability or restlessness
- Denial of hunger and/or avoidance of meal times
- Unusual eating habits
- Obsessive interest in food preparation
- Frequent dieting or weight fluctuations
- Repeated checking of body weight or size
- Excessive exercise
- Refusal to eat
- Dental problems or hair loss
- Distorted body image
- Low self-esteem
- Depression and moodiness
- Irregular or absent menstruation
- Perfectionism
- Visiting the bathroom after or during every meal
- Hoarding food in a bedroom or a secret place
- Self-induced vomiting
- Frequent use of laxatives, diuretics or diet pills
- Food controls your life

**What Can I Do?**
- Acknowledge that your behavior is destructive, in need of change and that change is your choice
- Seek professional help. There is treatment available for eating disorders and you can be helped
- Talk to someone -- don’t wait for others to cure you
- Remember, your selfworth is **not** based on the numbers on the scale

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2. *Disordered Eating: Help and Information for Eating Disorder (http://www.disordered-eating.co.uk/)*
   Adapted from: *National Eating Disorders Information Centre, Toronto; BC Eating Disorders Association, Victoria*