

Eating Disorders in Males

Males get eating disorders too.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses. While they are often portrayed as disorders that only affect females, one in ten people diagnosed with an eating disorder are male. However, we also know that the under-diagnosis and the cultural stigma boys and men face means that the actual proportion of males with eating disorders could be much higher.

For instance, we know that as many men experience binge eating disorder as women in their lifetime. Recent studies are indicating that the real figure could be that up to 25% of people with eating disorders are male.

Eating disorders can develop at any age but males and females are most at risk for anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa in their late teens/early twenties, while binge eating disorder is more prevalent in a person in their mid-twenties.

Body dissatisfaction

Rates of body dissatisfaction in males are rapidly approaching that of females. Body dissatisfaction in males can differ from body dissatisfaction in females. For males, it is more commonly manifested as the pursuit of a muscular, lean physique rather than a thinner physique or low body weight.

Research indicates that male athletes have an increased vulnerability to eating disorders, particularly those in sports with a greater emphasis on weight classes and aesthetic ideals such as weight lifters, wrestlers, gymnasts, dancers, jockeys and body builders. For some males, heightened concerns about muscularity may become part of an eating disorder, with distorted perceptions about muscle bulk, and /or distorted eating and exercise associated with building muscularity featuring.

There are some suggestions that attitudes to feminine traits in men may play a part in the development of eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa. There appears to be a relatively high rate of eating disorders in homosexual or bisexual males which may be related to these attitudes. However, there are more complex and multidimensional factors involved.



The factors that contribute to the onset of an eating disorder are complex. No single cause of eating disorders has been identified; however, known contributing risk factors include:

- Genetic vulnerability
- Psychological factors
- Socio-cultural influences

What are the risks for males?

Most of the common known risk factors for eating disorders apply to males and females (e.g. perfectionism, bullying, dieting, trauma, childhood obesity). Socio-cultural influences play a role in the development of eating disorders and males are exposed to unique cultural messages that can increase their vulnerability towards developing an eating disorder. These include:

- **Males should only have one body type** - the ideal physical body shape for men is now more prescribed with lean, muscular body types in fashion to the exclusion of other male body types
- **You are what you look like** - males are more at risk if they conflate having a 'perfect body' with success in other areas such as dating, getting a good job, and social desirability
- **Males need to be in control** – males can be expected to 'take charge' and be 'in control'. When coping with particular issues beyond their control, males can sometimes displace these anxieties onto their bodies, manifesting in control over the body through excessive exercise and dieting
- **Eating disorders and other mental illnesses are not masculine** – males can be expected to conceal personality traits and vulnerabilities that have traditionally been associated with females. A desire not to appear weak or vulnerable has led to a stigma around mental illness that has delayed treatment and support for many males with eating disorders. This stigma has been further exacerbated by the popular misconception that eating disorders are a 'female's disease'.

These negative cultural messages **do not** reflect the realities of mental and physical health in males.

What are the warning signs of eating disorders in males?

Being aware about eating disorders and acting on the warning signs and symptoms can have a marked influence on the severity and duration of the illness. Seeking help at the first warning sign is very important in this respect. However, the very nature of an eating disorder means that the person with an eating disorder will try and ensure any warning signs are concealed.



There are physical, psychological and behavioural warning signs that can signal the onset or the presence of an eating disorder in a male or a female but these are some warning signs that are more likely to occur in males:

- Preoccupation with body building, weight lifting or muscle toning
- Weight lifting when injured
- Lowered testosterone
- Anxiety/stress over missing workouts
- Muscular weakness
- Decreased interest in sex, or fears around sex
- Possible conflict over gender identity or sexual orientation
- Using anabolic steroids

Further, our socio-cultural influences mean that over-exercising and the extreme pursuit of muscle growth are frequently seen as healthy behaviours for males and can even be actively encouraged. The truth is that these activities can indicate a significant disorder and lead to severe physical health problems.

A person with an eating disorder may commonly display a combination of these symptoms:

Physical warning signs:

- Rapid weight loss or frequent changes in weight
- Fainting or dizziness
- Always feeling tired and not sleeping well
- Feeling cold most of the time, even in warm weather
- Feeling tired and not sleeping well

Psychological warning signs:

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and weight
- Feeling anxious around meal times
- Feeling 'out of control' around food
- Having a distorted body image
- Feeling obsessed with body shape, weight and appearance
- 'Black and white' thinking - rigid thoughts about food being 'good' or 'bad'
- Changes in emotional and psychological state - depression, stress, anxiety, irritability, low self esteem
- Using food as a source of comfort (e.g. eating as a way to deal with boredom, stress or depression)
- Using food as self punishment (e.g. refusing to eat due to depression, stress or other emotional reasons)

Behavioural warning signs:

- Dieting behaviour (e.g. fasting, counting calories/kilojoules, avoiding food groups such as fats and carbohydrates)
- Eating in private and avoiding meals with other people
- Evidence of binge eating (e.g. disappearance of large amounts of food)
- Changes in clothing style (e.g. wearing baggy clothes)
- Compulsive or excessive exercising (e.g. exercising in bad weather, in spite of sickness, injury or social events; and experiencing distress if exercise is not possible)
- Making lists of good or bad foods
- Suddenly disliking food they have always enjoyed in the past
- Obsessive rituals around food preparation and eating (e.g. eating very slowly, cutting food into very small pieces, insisting that meals are served at exactly the same time everyday)
- Extreme sensitivity to comments about body shape, weight, eating and exercise habits
- Secretive behaviour around food (e.g. saying they have eaten when they haven't, hiding uneaten food in their rooms)

Is it possible for a male to recover from an eating disorder?

Yes. It is possible for males to recover from eating disorders. Evidence shows that the sooner someone starts treatment for an eating disorder, the shorter the recovery process. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for males to go untreated longer and to receive less professional care than females.

Commonly males only seek treatment or receive a correct medical diagnosis when symptoms become severe and few services are designed to meet the specific needs of males with eating disorders. The stigma associated with having a 'female disease' also contributes to a delay in seeking help.

Getting help

If you suspect that you or someone else you know, male or female, has an eating disorder, it is important to seek help immediately. Your GP is a good 'first base' and can refer you to a practitioner with specialised knowledge in eating disorders.

To find help in your local area go to www.nedc.com.au/helplines

The NEDC constantly reviews research evidence on eating disorders. Recent research can be found at www.nedc.com.au/research-resources Each of the publications of the NEDC also draw on an extensive review of evidence and expert opinion. NEDC publications and their bibliographies can be found at www.nedc.com.au/nedc-publications In addition to NEDC publications, this fact sheet has drawn on other sources of information which can be found at www.nedc.com.au/fact-sheet-bibliography

