

Lee Nunn
Blog Post

Eating Disorders - How prevalent are they and what to look for?

Eating Disorders (ED) are behavioral conditions that impact eating behavior. If you looked around a theatre or a sports arena; would you be able to tell how many people in the crowd have an eating disorder? Could you recognize some signs that might tip you off?

It might surprise you to know that worldwide EDs affect at least 9% of the population which is around 700 Million people. In the U.S. it's the same percentage or around 28.8 Million Americans. Developed and developing nations have the same percentage of the population impacted by EDs so it's not necessarily a monetary issue. In the U.S. EDs are among the deadliest mental illnesses, second only to opioid overdose with 10,200 deaths each year — that's one death related to an ED every 52 minutes. And you would be correct in thinking that the sheer numbers would affect the economy - to the tune of \$64.7 billion per year.

In terms of body size, the thinnest people are most likely to have an ED, but less than 6% of people with ED are medically diagnosed as "underweight." In fact, a larger body size is both a risk factor for developing ED and a common outcome for people who struggle with bulimia and binge eating disorder.

Most people think that the stereotypical person with an ED is a young white, moderately affluent, teenage female, and this is in fact true. For certain EDs women are diagnosed twenty times more frequently than men. However, did you know that 42% of 1st-3rd graders want to be thinner and 81% of 10-year-olds are afraid of being fat? Those are some staggering numbers, especially considering this age group. The shaping of what is society's version of accepted and normal starts before the teen years. When teens reach their young adult years, between 35-47% begin to engage in risky behaviors such as crash dieting, fasting, self-induced vomiting, diet pills, and laxatives. It doesn't slow down when they get to college. One survey showed that 91% of college women admitted to controlling their weight through dieting.

The numbers are actually more dramatic for the LGBTQ+ community. Homosexual men are seven times more likely to report binge-eating and twelve times more likely to report purging than heterosexual men. Transgender college students have EDs at around four times the rate of their cisgender counterparts. And non-binary people may restrict their eating to appear thin, consistent with the commonly accepted stereotype.

What are the signs that would tip you off that someone may have an ED? Nutritional deficiencies due to restrictive EDs can show up in many ways such as hair falling out, constant fatigue and aches, dry scaly skin, sunken eyes, and lanugo which are fine hairs all over the body which grow to prevent body temperature loss. In women, a lack of menstruation for three months in a row is a telltale sign that an ED may be a cause. In less restrictive ED types, nutritional deficiencies may not be as obvious. In this case, observing certain behaviors such as obsession with weight concerns, feeling the need to control oneself around food, and exhibiting odd behaviors during or after meals including not eating in front of others and going to the bathroom after each meal can be of concern.

EDs are not uncommon, and chances are you have met someone today who, in their lifetime, will experience one of these illnesses. If you feel as though you or someone you know may have an ED, you

can contact the National Eating Disorders hotline at (800) 931-2237 and/or open up an encouraging conversation to offer support and discuss resources and treatment options. Friends and family are often the most encouraging push that individuals need to seek treatment for EDs.