

Eating disorders and sport

Participating in sport can be a healthy strategy to improve physical and mental health, social connectedness, and general fun and enjoyment. For some people however, their dedication to sport and exercise can become a major focus in their life to the exclusion of other areas which may increase their risk of developing an eating disorder.

Where people feel under pressure to maintain a certain body composition and physique, for example elite sports professionals or people significantly focused on changing their body weight or size, disordered eating and eating disorders are prevalent. Athletes who believe weight regulation can enhance their sporting performance are at higher risk of engaging in disordered eating. In particular, research shows that people who engage in aesthetic sports, and sports that use judging as a scoring method (e.g. gymnastics and figure skating), have a higher risk of developing eating disorders compared to refereed sports (e.g. soccer).

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are psychological illnesses which can lead to serious physical consequences and complications. They are characterised by an unhealthy preoccupation with eating and body weight or shape.

Anyone can experience an eating disorder, but they are not always easy to detect. This is because eating disorders are primarily mental illnesses and not indicated by someone's shape

and size. Often, a person with an eating disorder will go to great lengths to disguise worrying and dangerous behaviours.

Nutrition and excessive exercise: how to identify eating disorders in sport

While each person's nutritional requirements are unique, one of the best measures for the energy we require is appetite. This is dependent on an individual's metabolism, activity level, age and a range of other factors. Inadequate energy and nutrient intake affects the body's ability to function well and adversely affects physical performance of people who are regularly engaging in sporting activities. Restrictive eating specifically for the purpose of weight control increases the chances of developing an eating disorder. Instead research suggests encouraging individuals to consider finding a balanced diet that works for them and that fuels their body appropriately, with the focus on obtaining positive health outcomes rather than kilojoule control.

A healthy focus on nutrition and exercise is a great way to find balance and health. Excessive exercise, which can mean frequency or exercising through injury or fatigue or declining social invitations is a concerning behaviour that may indicate someone has a problem. Excessive exercise is not only unsustainable but can significantly endanger a person's health.

It can be difficult to identify an eating disorder or disordered eating because the dietary and exercise needs for athletes differ from non-athletes, especially at an elite level. The table below compares the difference between an athlete's healthy focus on nutrition and exercise vs. disordered eating.

HEALTHY ATHLETE FOCUS

- Aim is performance enhancement
- Emphasis is on adequate intake rather than restriction
- Likely to revert to normal at end of sporting career

DISORDERED EATING AMONG ATHLETES

- Use of potentially harmful weight control measures
- Excessive exercise
- Extreme, restrictive or faddy diets
- Self-induced vomiting
- Laxatives, diuretics, enemas, diet pills and stimulants

What can coaches do?

Coaches are often viewed as role models and mentors to athletes, and are in a powerful position to assist with the prevention, management and intervention of eating disorders. Although it is not the coach's responsibility to diagnose an eating disorder or provide psychological support, it is important to be able to identify indicators and unhealthy behaviours in order to support the restoration of the athlete's wellbeing.

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Coaches may be able to identify early warning signs and promote positive messages about body image and healthy eating and exercise by modelling appropriate attitudes and behaviours. Coaches concerned about an athlete's disordered eating behaviour should communicate their concerns with the athlete and consider supporting them to access professional support as early as possible.

Communication: what should I say?

Before approaching someone about your concerns, it is important to be prepared. Consider the time and place you wish to approach them and choose a place where they will feel comfortable. It is a good idea to inform yourself about eating disorders (many resources can be found at the Eating Disorders Victoria website <http://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/>) in order to gain a better understanding about why they may be engaging in disordered eating behaviours and ask about the treatment and referral pathways to assist them.

Remember it is not your responsibility to provide ongoing psychological assistance. Be clear about your role and what you can offer.

When communicating with the athlete ensure that you:

- ✔ Let them know they are safe talking to you
- ✔ Let them know you are concerned for their welfare and that support is available
- ✔ Let them know admission of physical or mental health problems will not jeopardise their participation

in the sport, and identify how compromised health may put them at risk of injury

- ✔ Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' – this is less threatening
- ✔ Encourage the athlete to discuss any pressures they are experiencing as a result of their engagement in the sport and to find ways of managing it proactively
- ✔ Try to be considerate, non-threatening, empathetic and non-accusatory
- ✔ Focus on behavioural or psychological changes that you have noticed rather than weight, food consumption and appearance
- ✔ Don't seek to label or diagnose the person
- ✔ Remain professional and respectful
- ✔ Encourage the athlete to manage their nutritional and sporting requirements in a healthy manner
- ✔ Remind the athlete of their positive personal qualities outside of their chosen sport, and discuss the benefits of recovery while encouraging seeking professional help
- ✔ Consider duty of care requirements
- ✔ Refer to relevant organisational policies and procedures if available

What not to say or do

- ✔ Don't threaten, bribe or manipulate the athlete
- ✔ It is not helpful to ignore the problem and hope that it will go away
- ✔ Don't try and convince the person that they are 'not fat'. Eating disorders are mental illnesses and cannot be resolved with logic.
- ✔ Try not to take on the role of a therapist or counsellor. Instead, encourage the athlete to seek professional help.



- ✔ Don't encourage disordered or unhealthy behaviours

How EDV can help

Eating Disorders Victoria has a range of support services which can be found on the website at www.eatingdisorders.org.au which includes information about eating disorders, support groups, online forums and psychologist and practitioner referrals.

The Eating Disorders Helpline provides information, guidance and support to anyone whose life is affected by an eating disorder, body image issues or disordered eating. Call 1300 550 236, email help@eatingdisorders.org.au or drop into the office between 10am-3pm, Monday to Friday.