

Eating Disorders in Men

There is often a misconception that eating disorders only affect girls and women, however they are serious mental illnesses that can affect all people, regardless of their sex or identified gender.

Research shows that about **25-40%** of people with eating disorders are male. Males are also just as likely as females to want to change their weight, or to be engaging in eating disordered behaviours. Males also face objectification and sexualisation in the media, just like women do.



Men and women are also exposed to similar risk factors that may increase the likelihood of an eating disorder developing. These could include participation in sports with a greater emphasis on weight or aesthetic ideals, or exposure to sociocultural messages that pursuing an ideal body type, level of fitness, degree of thinness and/or muscularity is 'healthy', admirable and desirable.

Myths and Misconceptions

The increased stigma associated with men and eating disorders creates a number of significant problems:

- Men may be less likely to recognize that they are experiencing an eating disorder
- Men may be less likely to seek help for an eating disorder due to fear of being stigmatized
- Standard eating disorder assessment tools may underestimate eating disorder symptoms in men
- Professionals may overlook early signs of eating disorder symptoms in men (e.g., rapid weight loss, over-concern re. weight and shape, driven exercise etc.) or misdiagnose these as other mental health problems
- Professionals may be less likely to refer men to specialist eating disorder services (mistakenly thinking they are exclusively for women)
- Men may dismiss the diagnosis of an eating disorder
- We may underestimate how many men are affected by eating disorders, due to fewer men presenting for treatment or being appropriately diagnosed

Men and Women with Eating Disorders: Similarities and Differences

Many experiences are common to people with an eating disorder, regardless of their sex or identified gender. These include:

- Preoccupation with food, eating, and dieting
- Concerns about shape and weight
- Potential for serious medical complications
- Disruption to hormonal functioning
- Other concurrent mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety
- Poor self-esteem and/or low self-compassion

Some differences may be seen in males with eating disorders:

- Amongst those with eating disorders, men tend to have higher rates of past obesity than women
- The average age of onset for eating disorders tends to be later in men than in women
- While women's menstruation may be disrupted due to disordered eating, in men, lowered hormone levels results in decreased sexual desire or disrupted sexual functioning (see our handout *Eating Disorders and Hormones*)
- Weight control methods sometimes (but not always!) differ between men and women. For example, men may be more likely to try to control their weight with exercise, whilst women may be more likely to engage in dietary restriction
- For *some* men, heightened concerns about muscularity may become part of the eating disorder. This may involve a misperception of either their own or others' muscularity and a preoccupation with becoming more muscular and 'bulking up' rather than pursuing weight loss or a smaller frame

Seeking Treatment

If you are a male who is struggling with concerns about food, eating, body weight and shape (including thinness or muscularity), it is important that you seek professional advice and treatment. Talking to your GP is often a good place to start.

You may like to visit *The National Association for Males with Eating Disorders (N.A.M.E.D.)* website for more information: <http://namedinc.org>