

Eating Disorders

Overview

Creating a positive culture around food, nutrition, weight, and shape is crucial for young athletes. Misconceptions about the ideal athlete's appearance can lead to unhealthy behaviours. Athletes' bodies naturally change due to growth and training, yet a fixed view of their optimal state often persists. Eating disorders, such as anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating, are significant concerns that affect health, performance, and well-being.

Terminology

Eating Disorder: Psychological disorders with abnormal eating habits.

Anorexia Nervosa: Refusal to maintain normal weight, intense fear of weight gain, distorted body image.

Bulimia Nervosa: Binge eating followed by compensatory behaviours like vomiting, excessive exercise, or laxative use.

Binge Eating Disorder: Recurrent episodes of eating large amounts quickly, feeling out of control.

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder: Eating disturbance causing weight loss, nutritional deficiency, reliance on supplements, or psychosocial issues.

Body Composition: Amounts of fat, bone, and muscle in the body.

Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (REDs): Impaired physiological functions due to energy deficiency, affecting metabolism, menstrual function, bone health, immunity, protein synthesis, and cardiovascular health.



Key Issues

Athletes often feel pressured to maintain a specific weight or shape for performance or aesthetic reasons, influenced by coaches, peers, and self-expectations. Some sports emphasise weight and appearance more, increasing the risk of eating disorders. These disorders can cause serious health issues like menstrual dysfunction, dehydration, stress fractures, and weakened immunity.

Emotional and Behavioural Signs



- Preoccupation with Food and Weight
- Food Rituals
- Avoidance of Meals
- Withdrawal
- Mood Swings
- Impaired Judgement
- Depression

- Weight Fluctuations
- Gastrointestinal Issues
- Menstrual Irregularities
- Dizziness and Fainting
- Dental Problems
- Dry Skin and Hair
- Poor bone health
- Metabolic issues
- Cardiovascular impairment
- Decreased training response and muscle strength
- Decreased coordination and concentration
- Decreased endurance performance
- Increased risk of injury



Education and Awareness

Coaches should educate themselves about eating disorders, their signs, and their impact on athletes. Bringing in professionals to educate athletes and support staff about eating disorders can help create a supportive environment. To help educate and inform those working with athletes you can visit the NSPCC Sport resource on "[weight management and disordered eating in sport](#)" which addresses the following topics:

Part 1 – Exploring terminology.

Part 2 – Transitions (understanding adolescent development).

Part 3 – Weight monitoring in sports settings.

Part 4 – Weight-making sports and activities.

Part 5 – Creating positive cultures in sport around food, weight and shape.

Early Intervention

Sports leaders can often spot changes in an athlete's behaviour, mood, or appearance. Early recognition allows for timely intervention. If they suspect an eating disorder, they should approach the athlete privately and express concerns without judgment.



Collaboration with Professionals

Sports leaders should connect athletes with healthcare professionals specialising in eating disorders. Involving the athlete's family can provide extra support. If you notice signs, seek professional help early for better recovery chances.



Creating a Supportive Environment

- Sports organisations need clear policies for addressing eating disorders, including referral and treatment guidelines.
- Sport leaders should regularly check in with athletes to discuss well-being and concerns.
- Develop individual care plans for ongoing support.
- Set realistic goals for returning to sport after an absence.
- Ensure emotional health is prioritised.
- Create exercise protocols with specialist in healthy eating and nutrition.
- Sports leaders should use mindful language about weight, body image, and nutrition.

Eating disorders are not about vanity or attention seeking. They stem from feeling overwhelmed and compelled to cope. The causes are complex, and athletes may not want to discuss them with their coach.



Additional Resources:

[Bodywhys | Athletes & Sport](#)

[Fuel Your Performance | Sport Ireland](#)

[Don't think you have to look a certain way to be a sporting success': Sport Ireland video fights body misconceptions | Sport Ireland](#)

[Podcast – Eating disorders mini series | CPSU](#)

[Healthy Body Image | IOC](#)

[Spotting The Signs Of Eating Disorders Is Everyone's Business - Beat](#)

[Eating Disorders Services | HSE](#)

