

ORTHOREXIA NERVOSA

As a student-athlete, I know nutrition and performance go hand-in-hand. That's why I eat only healthy foods—strictly organic, and no sugar, saturated fat, trans fat or cholesterol. My teammates think I'm too preoccupied with what I eat. It's just that when I eat something that's bad for me, I feel bad about myself, just like when we lose a match. Lately, I'm less happy and social, and my training isn't going so well either.

CAN EATING TOO HEALTHY ACTUALLY BE A PROBLEM?



TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

Eating well is important; however, like any behavior, too much of a good thing can nudge an athlete toward negative results. A preoccupation with healthy eating can lead to a form of dysfunctional eating called orthorexia nervosa. Simply put, it is a fixation on righteous or healthy eating. Athletes may use the words “pure” or “correct” to describe their food choices. Orthorexia is on the rise, with athletic populations at greater risk with outcomes that undermine health.

Following a vegetarian or vegan diet or choosing to eliminate foods due to allergy or sensitivity does not mean someone has orthorexia.

IS ORTHOREXIA NERVOSA AN EATING DISORDER?

The answer is no. Individuals with orthorexia are overly attentive to food and how it affects their bodies, but they are not generally motivated by fear of weight gain or body fat. Orthorexia nervosa starts as a desire to improve nutrition and performance. However, over time it evolves into a good vs. bad food approach to eating. Orthorexia nervosa does share characteristics seen with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), anorexia nervosa or addiction.

HOW IS CHOOSING TO EAT HEALTHY A BAD THING?

Healthy eating is an important goal for student-athletes. However, healthy eating intentions that lead to elimination of too many foods or food groups can result in nutrient deficiencies, compromised immune function, decreased athletic performance and poor health.

An important distinction between healthy eating and orthorexia is its impact on one's social life. Individuals begin to isolate themselves and avoid situations where food options are seen as problematic. Also, time spent thinking about food, planning meals, finding acceptable foods and scrutinizing food labels increases. Because they so harshly judge their eating habits, their guilt and shame relating to food choices increases and self-esteem declines. When food choices frequently dictate your feelings or mood, it is time to seek help.

IS BEING A VEGETARIAN A RISK FACTOR FOR ORTHOREXIA?

No, following a vegetarian or vegan diet, or choosing to eliminate foods due to allergy or sensitivity does not mean someone has orthorexia. Student-athletes are able to fuel adequately within a wide range of eating styles. Any eating style needs to meet your body's requirements for all essential nutrients. Any unbalanced eating style, regardless of beliefs, will have consequences. Orthorexia is a concern due to its impact on day-to-day quality of life and overall nutritional status. Student-athletes with orthorexia may lose the joy that sport participation once offered and may experience variable training outcomes, hindered athletic performance and less focus on performance goals.



WORRIED ABOUT SOMEONE?

If you are worried about someone, talk with him or her and share your concerns. Stick to the facts, give examples, and suggest talking to a therapist and/or registered dietitian with experience in eating disorders.

While individuals with orthorexia may know a great deal about nutrition and food, they are often making food choices based on incorrect or misleading information. Working with experienced professionals will help them sort out fact from fiction.

If someone is afraid to make an appointment, offer to accompany him or her to the first meeting. This will help him or her to keep the appointment and show that you care.

Student-athletes feel a great deal of pressure to perform well. Approval from coaches, trainers, administrators, parents and teammates carries a lot of power. Sometimes, student-athletes looking for an untapped performance boost will turn to nutrition. However, performance is a recipe of many different variables. Nutrition is one, but it cannot replace or supplant any other variable. Food preoccupations force athletes to choose food over their sport. Orthorexia is more about the individual's feelings of self-esteem and other underlying conditions than it is about food and nutrition.

WHAT ARE RISK FACTORS FOR ORTHOREXIA NERVOSA?

There is not a one-size-fits-all set of criteria. Instead, ask yourself the following questions. Answering yes to several of these may be an indication of a problem, or a risk of developing an eating-related problem.

- Are you unable to eat foods provided at team meals or training table?
- Do you refuse to eat certain foods because they are not “pure” or “clean”?
- Do you avoid eating with family or friends, or in social situations?
- Do you reject foods you once loved to eat?
- Do you feel anxious about food that you did not prepare yourself?
- Do you try to think about ways a food could be considered unhealthy?
- Do you feel guilty when you stray from your specific diet?
- Do you wish that you could just eat and not worry about it?
- Do you feel in control when you stick to your eating plan?
- Can making one “wrong” food choice ruin your day or your performance?
- Do you exercise more or restrict food intake when you feel you’ve had a “bad” eating day or made a “wrong” food choice?
- Do you take pride in eating healthier than other people?
- Do you judge people based on the way they eat?
- Do you dream about eating “bad” or disallowed foods?
- Do you find yourself thinking about food during practice or class, to the point that your focus is divided?

WHAT IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO MANY OF THESE QUESTIONS?

- Good job for being honest. Acknowledging that food preoccupation is getting in the way of your performance is the first step.
- You can do this. It's going to take a little time, but just like other dysfunctional eating patterns, it's not going to fix itself or simply disappear.
- Emotional issues are the underpinning of this disorder. Addressing those will help make you a happier, more successful and healthier athlete.
- Start small. Pick one or two foods that you previously enjoyed and incorporate them back into your diet.
- When the self-judgment starts, take a deep breath and tell yourself that a diet high in variety is necessary for your athletic performance and overall health.
- If you fear losing control of your diet and/or changing your food beliefs, this is a good indication that you should seek out support and professional help.

WHAT IF I NO LONGER KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO EAT HEALTHY?

- Work with a sports dietitian to develop a well-designed eating plan.
- View eating as fuel for your performance.
- Apply the time-tested practices of sport nutrition:
 - Consume a balanced diet throughout the day.
 - Apply fueling strategies for before and during training and recovery.
 - Hydrate throughout the day.
- Rest, recover and repeat.

IF THIS SOUNDS GOOD, THEN IT MAY BE TIME TO CONSIDER IF ORTHOREXIA IS GETTING IN YOUR WAY.