

When Does Dieting Become Unhealthy?

Discerning the difference between dieting and disordered eating can seem tricky, but recognizing the signs and changing behavior could impact the long-term health of you or a loved one. With rates of disordered eating on the rise — approximately one in five boys and one in three girls are experiencing disordered eating across the world, according to an analysis of 32 studies recently published in JAMA — it is important to detect the signs early and to seek help right away.

The difference between dieting and disordered eating can be subtle but it is significant. Signs of disordered eating include:

Obsessive Calorie Counting: A constant fixation on calories, accompanied by anxiety when exceeding a self-imposed limit.

Avoidance of Food Groups: Unnecessarily eliminating entire food groups without a medical rationale.

Laxative Abuse: Resorting to laxatives as a means of purging consumed food.

Binge Eating: Secretive, shame-filled episodes of consuming abnormally large quantities of food in a short timeframe.

Fasting: Prolonged periods of food avoidance, often used as a misguided weight-loss strategy.

Compulsive Exercise: An unhealthy relationship with exercise, involving excessive intensity or distress when missing a workout.

Self-Induced Vomiting: Voluntarily vomiting, whether post-binge or after a regular meal.

While disordered eating isn't considered an eating disorder by itself, people who engage in disordered eating are at high risk of developing an eating disorder over time. Even when disordered eating doesn't lead to a clinical eating disorder, it's associated with long-term mental and physical problems such as psychological distress and poorer overall health.

A combination of therapy, medication, nutrition-based therapy and lifestyle changes are often recommended to help people recover from disordered eating. Choosing a therapist, psychologist or counselor skilled in eating disorders is the first step in the right direction.

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If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, you can find additional resources through the **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)** or call the **National Association of Anorexia Nervosa & Associated Disorders (ANAD)** Helpline at 888-375-7767.