

To eat or not to eat....

Eating disorders affect health, personality, images of female college students

BY BETH FOCHT
The Battalion

An estimated 25 percent of all college-age woman have an eating disorder, and 50 percent of teenage girls are anorexic, according to the department of Student Health Education Services. Problems ranging from overeating to binge eating and purging are all common disorders and can lead to heart problems, osteoporosis, reproductive difficulties, depression, substance-abuse disorders and ultimately death.

National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, Feb. 21 through 27, is a national effort to increase knowledge of these types of diseases in an effort to stop their destructiveness. This week is sponsored nationally by eating disorder advocacy groups as well as groups specifically interested in educating college students.

Eating disorders are illnesses associated with severe body image distortion and an obsession with weight.

People who suffer from anorexia nervosa starve themselves by drastically restricting their caloric intake. Sufferers have a morbid fear of being fat, and this fear leads to drastic dieting.

Another common eating disorder, bulimia nervosa, is characterized by short binge periods of eating an unusually large amount of food then purging by vomiting, using laxatives or compulsively exercising. Sufferers generally feel ashamed and guilty because they can not control their eating habits.

Dr. Jane Cohen, a nutrition specialist at the A.P. Beutel Heath Center, said disorders are being seen at earlier ages.

"These disorders are showing up in younger girls, including cases of an 11-year-old being reported with these problems," Cohen said.

With girls having eating problems this young, it is not surprising that college students, even on the Texas A&M campus, have such a high rate of these types of disorders.

Cohen said problems may be related to several things including relationships, stress, school and issues of control.

"If a student continuously uses food to handle stresses, there might be a problem," she said. "You don't want to use food to compromise your situation."

Cohen said people who are susceptible to developing a disorder may start with a diet to help improve self-esteem or to change their

weight or body shape.

"Sometimes, as a diet progresses, an individual may become more obsessed with weight loss and less able to eat normally," she said. "For those who develop an eating disorder, this can be the beginning of a downward spiral, which can have tragic medical and emotional consequences."

In an effort to make Texas A&M students more aware of the existing problem, the Beutel Heath Center, along with Aggie Representative Educating About College Health (REACH), is sponsoring several activities on campus to help make students aware of problems.

Throughout the week, there will be eating disorder information tables in the Commons, Wehner, Kleberg and the Student Recreation Center to provide students with general information on diseases and how to detect eating disorders.

On Feb. 23, "Eating Disorders," a program presented by Aggie REACH, will discuss various issues about eating disorders in room 016 of Beutel Health Center.

On Feb. 24, at 8:30 p.m. in MSC 206, an eating disorder program, panel and video will be held featuring psychologist Dr. Mary Anne Moore, physician Dr. Ann Reed, dietitian Dr. Jane Cohen and a student recovering from an eating disorder. This discussion will be open for any type of information and questions on eating disorders.

Cohen said college students are aware of diseases but might not know what to look for if they feel someone they know might have a problem.

"Students with eating disorders are often terrified of gaining weight and continue to diet, or binge and purge even as their mental and physical health deteriorate," she said. "Someone with a disorder might almost pass out while jogging; they might have a weak heartbeat and almost no blood pressure. These are just a few physical things to look for."

"Other things to look for might be the layering of clothes, the hiding of food and vomiting," Cohen said. "Generally students know when something is wrong with their friend down the hallway, and if students see these signs, it might be something to approach their friends about."

For more information on these disorders, contact the Beutel Heath Center's Health Education Center at 845-1341 or Aggie REACH at 847-9241.



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