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Information for coaches

Sports and eating disorders.

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HEALTHY SPORT is a field of priority within the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports aiming to reduce the incidence of eating disorders among young athletes and to ensure healthy athletes stay healthy.

The target group is athletes aged 13 to 18 years and their coaches, parents and support systems.

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders involve having a difficult or disturbed relationship with your body, weight, food and emotions.

There are different types and severities of eating disorders. The two main types are **anorexia nervosa** (anorexia) and **bulimia nervosa** (bulimia), but the majority of people with eating disorders are categorised as having **unspecific eating disorders**.

It can be difficult to determine if a person has an eating disorder based on how they look. Most people with problems have a normal body weight. Some are skinny, and others are overweight. The line between normal and unhealthy is often unclear. This makes it hard for people around them to know if there is a reason for concern. Boys and men can also have eating disorders, but the prevalence is lower.

Eating disorders and sports

Athletes are considered high risk for developing eating disorders. This especially applies to athletes in sports that focus on being slim or having a certain weight, such as sports based on endurance, weight classes and aesthetics.

Eating disorders occur as an interaction between our individual congenital attributes, the people and the environment around us. Three factors in particular seem to increase the risk of eating disorders:

- Transition from young athlete to senior
As a coach you should be aware of physical as well as psychological changes related to entering puberty. This can be a vulnerable time for a lot of young people.
- Dieting
Young athletes should not be advised to lose weight. If they have a strong wish to change their bodies, you can help them get in touch with a qualified professional, for instance a nutritionist.
- Injury or illness
Long periods when the athlete cannot train as they want or as planned, can create uncertainty related to energy intake and consumption.

It is possible to overcome an eating disorder with a lot of personal effort and motivation, especially if the problems are confronted early on. It is important that the youth has a strong support network, and as their coach, you can play an important supportive role.

What should you be looking out for as a coach?

As a coach, you are often unable to observe the athlete in other situations than training and competitions. This limits the arenas where you can observe changes in eating habits, but does not prevent you from keeping your eyes and ears open. Watch out for the following early signs:

Physical signs:

- Weight loss or weight fluctuations.
- Frequent and unexplained injuries, strain symptoms.
- Fatigue, more tired than normal when training.
- Stomach pain, nausea and feeling of fullness after eating small amounts of food.
- Low body temperature, gets cold easily.
- Absent or irregular menstruation.
- Fluffy hair in the face and, especially, on the back.
- Dull and lackluster hair.

Signs related to mood and behaviour

- Excessive training – training more than normal or planned.
- Increased mood swings.
- Sleeping difficulties, wakes up very early.
- Weigh themselves often, extreme fear of weight gain.
- Significant changes in performance at school and/or in their sport.
- Low view of themselves and their body.
- Developing rigid daily routines.
- Social withdrawal, avoiding birthdays, school events, etc.

Signs related to food

- Obsessed with food, increased focus on healthy eating.
- Sensitive relationship with food – sudden 'intolerances'.
- Eating less or change of diet, for instance becoming a vegetarian.
- Nearly always choosing low calorie food.
- Changed behaviour with food – for instance cutting food into small pieces, moving it around on the plate or spreading it.
- Leaves the table during the meal or immediately after to go to their room or the bathroom. Turns on loud music, TV or tap to hide vomiting.
- Cases of excessive or hidden eating.
- Will not accept unplanned situations related with food and meals, for instance changing meal times.

Remember that these signs in isolation do not necessarily mean that someone has an eating disorder. If in doubt, please contact qualified professionals.



What do I do if I am concerned?

You are not alone in not knowing how to deal with concerns about a possible eating disorder. It is important that you as an adult take the signs seriously and initiate a conversation with the athlete. Be clear about what you have seen and why you are concerned. For the athlete, it can feel worse to be ignored and treated like they are invisible, than to be confronted.

It is common for a person with problems to deny that there is a problem, and they may reject you. Denial of symptoms can be a symptom in itself. You should express your concerns and what you think should be the next step, for instance contacting a qualified professional. As a coach, it is important that you maintain your coaching role, rather than becoming a therapist. The most important thing for the athlete is that you are supportive and express any concerns you or other people may have about the situation.

The primary health service can assist you with advice and guidance, and assess whether a psychologist or psychiatrist is necessary. A nutritionist can give you nutritional guidance. An interdisciplinary approach can be useful during treatment.

How can eating disorders be prevented?

As a coach, you are responsible for helping each athlete's development. Good systematic training over many years, as well as good attitudes and a healthy lifestyle, is a proved recipe for success. It is not always the case that the athletes who perform best at youth and junior level turn into the best senior athletes. Patience should therefore be fundamental in your work to help the athlete's development.

In today's society, a lot of our identity is connected to achievements and success. Give the athletes confirmation about who they are as people, and not just about their performance in training or competitions.

Good advice for coaches

Be aware of the natural physical changes that happen in puberty. Many athletes experience stagnation or setbacks due to these changes.

Avoid body related comments – whether it is about yourself or other athletes, positive or negative.

Teach the athletes how the body works, rather than how it should look.

Take an interest in the athlete's whole situation. School, training, family and friends should create a good balance – since many factors affect performance.

Discuss and involve your athletes when it comes to goals and development planning. Teach the athletes to take responsibility for their own development.

Good habits start early – teach your athletes which foods affect their training. A good team culture is important, and the athletes should help decide what kind of culture you want on the team.

Talk to your athletes and build trust. This makes it easier to start a difficult conversation if this becomes necessary.

As a coach, you can be the catalyst to get help if one of your athletes need guidance about nutrition or body weight. Do not take on a role as therapist.

Sports should be fun!

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