

# Talking with Patients

## Eating Disorders and Oral Health

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### WHAT IS IT?

*Bulimia nervosa* and *anorexia nervosa* are eating disorders that affect the person's ability to adequately manage his or her eating habits. Although most people believe that people with eating disorders are obsessively concerned with their body image and losing weight, psychological issues almost always underlie the etiology of the condition. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, it is estimated that more than 10 million Americans suffer with either bulimia nervosa or anorexia nervosa,<sup>1</sup> two of the most common eating disorders. Bulimia nervosa is characterized by compulsive overeating followed by self-induced vomiting, whereas anorexia nervosa is marked by extreme weight loss usually achieved through a severely restricted diet.

These conditions have a complex and multifactorial etiology involving physical, emotional, family, and social issues. When not properly diagnosed and treated, eating disorders can become chronic, debilitating, and even life-threatening conditions.

### HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?

Some of the first signs of eating disorders can be found in the mouth.

For example, it is estimated that more than 80% of bulimic patients show signs of tooth erosion. Therefore, the dental team can play an important role in the diagnosis of the disorder. Because eating disorders are often linked to repeated vomiting, erosion of the dental enamel by gastric acids is often observed, especially on the tongue side and biting surfaces of teeth. Redness of the throat and palate, reduced saliva flow (dry mouth), and dry lips also indicate that a person might be suffering from eating disorders.

Other warning signs of eating disorders include marked weight loss; abnormal preoccupation with weight, food, calories, and diet; denial of hunger; avoidance of meal times; evidence of purging behavior; lack of sleep; hormonal changes; depression; stomach pain; and withdrawal from one's usual group of friends and activities. Just as normal eating habits vary from person to person, the signs and symptoms of eating disorders will also be different among different people. Eating disorders not only can have a significant impact on your dental health, they also cause a higher risk of heart failure, osteoporosis (brittle bones), muscle loss, dehydration, and fatigue.

As eating disorders stem from psychological issues, counseling and

psychotherapy are critical to the treatment. To minimize the dental problems associated with eating disorders, patients are encouraged to rinse their mouth with sodium bicarbonate or magnesium hydroxide immediately after vomiting, brush regularly with a fluoride-containing toothpaste, use some form of topical fluoride after brushing (such as a fluoride rinse), have the eroded portions of the teeth restored with fillings or crowns, and seek regular dental checkups.

### CONCLUSIONS

Eating disorders can affect men and women of all ages and can be very debilitating and even life-threatening if not properly diagnosed and treated. Wear (or erosion) of the dental enamel, yellowing of the teeth owing to thinning of the enamel, hypersensitivity to cold, dry mouth, cracked lips, and cavities are dental-related conditions that arise from eating disorders. Talk to your dentist if you are concerned or have questions about eating disorders and their effect on your teeth.

### REFERENCE

1. National Eating Disorders Association. Eating Disorders Information Index: Statistics. Available at: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org) (accessed Jan 16, 2006).

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