



# At Risk: All Ethnic and Cultural Groups

*This information sheet is designed to raise awareness that disordered eating behaviors can occur among all ethnic groups.*

## **Boys and girls of all ethnic groups are susceptible to eating disorders**

Many people believe that eating disorders commonly occur among affluent white females. Although the prevalence of these disorders elsewhere in the population is much lower, an increasing number of males and minorities are also suffering from eating disorders.<sup>1</sup>

Girls and boys from all ethnic and racial groups may suffer from eating disorders and disordered eating. The specific nature of the most common eating problems, as well as risk and protective factors, may vary from group to group but no population is exempt.<sup>2</sup> Research findings regarding prevalence rates and specific types of problems among particular groups are limited, but it is evident that disturbed eating behaviors and attitudes occur across all cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Large percentages of African American, American Indian, and Hispanic females are overweight. Being overweight is a risk factor for engaging in disordered eating behaviors. Risk factors and incidence rates for eating disorders can vary dramatically among subgroups of a specific population.

## **Cultural norms regarding body size can play a role in the development of eating disorders**

In Western cultures, the ideal female body is thin. Membership in ethnic groups and cultures that do not value a thin body may protect girls from body dissatisfaction and weight concerns. However, young people who identify with cultures that prefer larger body sizes may be at risk for becoming overweight or



obese. Research also suggests that women who think they are smaller than the body size favored by their cultural group may be at risk for binge eating.<sup>4</sup>

*Latina women were almost expected to be more overweight. Latina women living in Puerto Rico were not uncomfortable with extra weight. To them, it wasn't extra. It wasn't an issue.<sup>5</sup>*

**—Laura, Puerto Rican native who had bulimia as a teenager**

## **Eating disorders among ethnically and culturally diverse girls may be underreported and undetected**

Eating disorders among ethnically and culturally diverse girls may be underreported due to the lack of population-based studies that include representatives from these groups. The perception that non-white females are at decreased risk may also contribute to the lack of detection. Stereotyped body images of ethnically diverse women (e.g., petite Asian American,



heavier African American) can also deter detection. In addition, for some ethnic and cultural groups, seeking professional help for emotional problems is not a common practice.

Girls of different ethnic and cultural groups often receive treatment for the accompanying symptoms of an eating disorder, such as depression or malnutrition, rather than for the eating disorder itself. When these girls are finally diagnosed as having an eating disorder, the disorder (especially anorexia), tends to be more severe. This problem is exacerbated by the difficulty they may have in locating culturally sensitive treatment centers.

### School personnel can help

*To deal with my eating disorder, I had to face my loneliness and insecurity. I had to shift my perspective and my lifestyle before I could let go of the excess weight and work on becoming strong and healthy. Now I realize that my experience is shared by many Black women.<sup>6</sup>*

—Victoria Johnson, African American fitness expert

Here are some ideas:

- ◆ Provide students with diverse role models of all shapes and sizes who are praised for their accomplishments, not their appearance.
- ◆ Invite community representatives to speak about specific cultural attitudes toward food preferences, dietary practices, and body image.
- ◆ Provide students with information on the relationship between nutrition and overall health.
- ◆ Gather and disseminate culturally sensitive materials on eating disorders, puberty, and other adolescent health issues.
- ◆ Conduct media literacy activities that allow students to examine critically how magazines, television, and other media—including those targeting specific cultural groups—present the concept of beauty.
- ◆ Encourage children and adolescents of all ethnic and cultural groups to exercise and participate in sports and other athletic activities.

- ◆ Advocate for a safe and respectful school environment that prohibits gender, cultural, and racial stereotyping as well as sexual harassment, teasing, and bullying.

### Definitions

**Anorexia nervosa** is self-starvation. People with this disorder eat very little even though they are thin. They have an intense and overpowering fear of body fat and weight gain.

**Bulimia nervosa** is characterized by cycles of binge eating and purging, either by vomiting or taking laxatives or diuretics (water pills). People with bulimia have a fear of body fat even though their size and weight may be normal.

**Overexercising** is exercising compulsively for long periods of time as a way to burn calories from food that has just been eaten. People with anorexia or bulimia may overexercise.

**Binge eating disorder** means eating large amounts of food in a short period of time, usually alone, without being able to stop when full. The overeating or bingeing is often accompanied by feeling out of control and then depressed, guilty, or disgusted.

**Disordered eating** refers to troublesome eating behaviors, such as restrictive dieting, bingeing, or purging, which occur less frequently or are less severe than those required to meet the full criteria for the diagnosis of an eating disorder.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Practice Guidelines for Eating Disorders. *American Psychiatric Association Practice Guidelines*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Smolak L, Striegel-Moore RH. Challenging the myth of the golden girl: Ethnicity and eating disorders. In RH Striegel-Moore, L Smolak (eds.), *Eating Disorders: Innovative Directions in Research and Practice*. Washington, DC: APA, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Perez M, Joiner Jr. TE. Body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating in Black and White women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 33, 342-350, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, B.W. *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Crute, S. (ed). *Health and Healing for African-Americans*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, Inc., 1997, p. 92.