

Body Image and Disordered Eating

What Staff Should Know

Nutrition and training are integral to athletic performance, but some student-athletes may develop unhealthy relationships with food, exercise or their bodies. **Coaches and athletic staff are in a unique position to notice early signs of disordered eating and body image concerns, intervene with care and connect student-athletes to mental health support.**

WHAT ARE BODY IMAGE AND DISORDERED EATING?

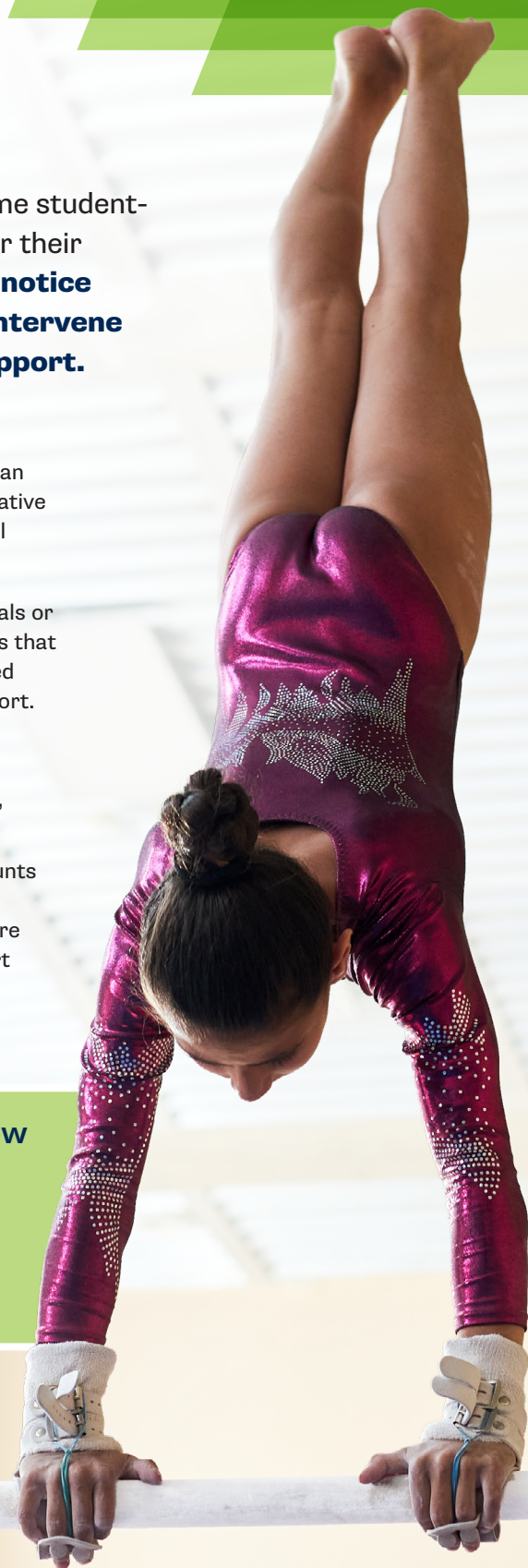
Body image is how a person perceives, thinks and feels about their body. Body image can be positive or negative and may be impacted by many factors. When someone has negative perceptions, thoughts and feelings about their body, it could be associated with mental health concerns, including disordered eating.

Disordered eating includes a range of unhealthy eating behaviors, such as skipping meals or restricting food intake. Eating disorders, however, are serious mental health conditions that impact student-athlete mental and physical health, safety and performance. Disordered eating and eating disorders can affect student-athletes of any gender, body type or sport.

- **Anorexia Nervosa** occurs when a person severely restricts food intake or calories below what the body needs.
- **Bulimia Nervosa** is repeated cycles of binge eating followed by behaviors to “undo” food intake, such as vomiting, overexercising or fasting.
- **Binge Eating Disorder** is characterized by recurrent episodes of eating large amounts of food quickly and feeling out of control while eating.
- **Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (REDs)** occurs when someone is burning more energy than they are consuming, leaving the body with insufficient energy to support normal physiological functions, daily activities and training.



About **50% of student-athletes** show some signs of extreme eating habits because of feeling the pressure to have a certain physique or meet a goal weight for their sport.



Recognizing the Signs

Disordered eating, eating disorders and body image concerns can develop gradually and may be masked by the discipline of athletic culture. Pay attention to changes in student-athlete attitude and performance over time.

- Frequent negative comments about body size, shape or weight.
- Obsessive focus on food, calories or “clean eating.”
- Avoiding team meals or eating alone.
- Fatigue, dizziness or more frequent illness or injury, including stress fractures.
- Exercising despite illness, injury or exhaustion.
- Significant weight loss, gain or fluctuation.
- Wearing baggy clothes to hide body changes.
- Relying heavily on supplements or protein powders.
- Letting nutrition or fitness routines interfere with academics, work, social life or sleep.
- Difficulty building muscle.



What To Do

- If you notice changes or are concerned about a student-athlete:
 - Reach out, show empathy and express your concerns while focusing on their overall well-being and avoiding judgmental language.
 - Help them connect with a licensed mental health provider for confidential support.
- Create a team culture that promotes body acceptance and mental well-being. Early intervention can help promote recovery.
- Review NCAA [dietary and nutrition resources](#).

Reassure them it is OK to be honest if they're struggling with eating, exercise or body image.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call, text or chat 988.

If you notice changes in a student-athlete, don't wait to offer support. Make it a habit to discuss body acceptance and how to have a healthy relationship with food, exercise and their bodies. Assure student-athletes that their health is the priority and essential to their athletic success and overall well-being.

For resources and guidance on mental health education, check out the [NCAA Mental Health Best Practices](#).

