

Body Image and Disordered Eating

What Student-Athletes Should Know

Nutrition and training are integral to athletic performance, but some student-athletes may develop unhealthy relationships with food, exercise or their bodies. Eating disorders are treatable, and help is available.

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 athletes of any gender, body type or sport.

- **Anorexia Nervosa** occurs when a person severely restricts food or calories below what your 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)** is burning more energy than you’re consuming, which can cause your body to shut down essential functions.

Recognizing the Signs

- Frequently criticizing or obsessing over weight or body size.
- Strict eating rules or eating very little.
- Relying heavily on supplements or protein powders.
- Feeling anxious if you miss a workout.
- Avoiding eating with groups.
- Forcing yourself to throw up.
- More frequent injuries, such as stress fractures.
- Irregular or missing menstrual cycles.



About **half of student-athletes** show signs of extreme eating behavior.

What To Do

- Open up to a coach, family member or other trusted adult.
- Seek out a licensed mental health provider – it’s private and confidential.
- Call the National Alliance for Eating Disorders helpline at 1-866-1235 (Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Eastern).
- Recognize that food is not your enemy and healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes.
- Be gentle with yourself. Recovery takes time.

If you’re worried about a teammate, share your concerns, listen empathetically and encourage them to seek professional help.

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



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

