Dear Alice:

Is it possible for a male to have an eating disorder? I mean, I know it's possible, but I've never heard of any documented cases. All I've seen are connected to females.

—Wondering

Answer

Dear Wondering,

Yes, both boys and men can and do suffer from eating disorders. In fact, disordered eating and eating disorders can affect anyone, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. You raise a great question, though; all too often eating disorders in boys and men are much less talked about than in girls and women. Health care providers are also less likely to diagnose males with an eating disorder compared to females and there are also fewer resources for boys and men who wish to get help with their condition.

In recent years, there has been increased attention (and research) given to this topic. Some older studies reported that around 10 percent of patients with eating disorders were men. More recent studies, however, indicate that as many as 30 percent of patients with anorexia or bulimia were male, and that men accounted for 40 percent of binge eating cases.

While men and women can both experience eating disorders, men are often trying to change their physical appearance for different reasons than women, including:

- A desire to improve athletic performance.
- A history of being teased, criticized, or picked on for being overweight.
- Wanting to change a specific body part (to reduce "flab" and promote muscle definition).
- To make required weight for a specific sport (i.e., wrestling or crew).
- To be more attractive to a potential partner.
- To look less like one's father.

In addition, it’s important to note that while women with eating disorders are often preoccupied
with weight, men tend to focus more on achieving a particular body type, such as being muscular or lean. One example of this is a disorder known as megarexia, a term used to describe an individual who is obsessed with increasing his or her muscle size. Men are more likely than women to have megarexia, which also goes by the names muscle dysmorphia or bigorexia. These individuals exhibit many of the same symptoms of other more well-known eating disorders, such as a very restricted diet, preoccupation with food and body weight, and a history of low-self esteem. For more information on this disorder, check out Obsessed with building muscle [2] in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

If someone is possibly suffering from anorexia, or any eating disorder, it is recommended they make an appointment with her/his health care provider. Recovery is difficult, but not impossible.

Take care,

Alice!

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