

Eating Disorders: Often Spotted First by Dentists

An eating disorder is a complex compulsion to eat in a way that disturbs physical, mental, and psychological health. The three most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. The eating may be excessive (compulsive over-eating); restrictive; or may include normal eating punctuated with episodes of purging (such as self-induced vomiting, use of laxatives, fasting, diuretics or diet pills). The eating may include cycles of bingeing and purging; or may encompass the ingesting of non-foods (such as dirt, clay or chalk). Each of these disorders robs the body of adequate minerals, vitamins, proteins, and other nutrients needed for good health and may cause injury to teeth, muscles, and major organs.

“Eating disorders have serious implications for oral health and overall health,” says Shannon Mills, DDS, Vice President of Professional Relations and Science at Northeast Delta Dental. “Stomach acids can damage teeth with repeated exposures during purging for those individuals with bulimia nervosa. For those individuals with anorexia nervosa, which is characterized by self-induced starvation, poor nutrition can affect oral health by increasing the risk for periodontal (gum) diseases.”

As many as 35 million men, women, and children suffer from eating disorders in the United States. Dentists are becoming the first line of defense when it comes to detecting eating disorders in patients, according to the Academy of General Dentistry. For example, although parents may not recognize that their child is anorexic or bulimic, they are often still taking the child to a dentist on a regular schedule and the dentist may spot the oral signs of the disease.



Bad breath, sensitive teeth, and eroded tooth enamel are just a few of the signs that dentists use to determine whether a patient suffers from an eating disorder. Other signs include teeth that are worn and appear almost translucent, mouth sores, dry mouth, cracked lips, bleeding gums, and tender mouth, throat, and salivary glands.

According to the National Eating Disorders Association, studies have found up to 89 percent of bulimic patients have signs of tooth erosion due to the effects of stomach acid. Over time, this loss of tooth enamel can be considerable, and the teeth change color, shape, and length.

“Northeast Delta Dental supports providing appropriate referral for those individuals with signs and symptoms of eating disorders and encourages those with eating disorders, or those who are caring for individuals with eating disorders to seek care from a dental professional to manage the dental consequences of these disorders,” Mills says.

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