

## An Athlete's Guide

Food and eating play an important part in every athlete's life. It is normal for athletes to experiment with their diet. Some try out special sports foods, while others may adopt vegetarian or even vegan diets. Some athletes also try eating more, or less, than usual in order to change their body shape or improve their performance. Within reason this is normal too.

However, extreme eating patterns can be damaging. Some athletes may develop an eating disorder. They may restrict their food intake because they are feeling unhappy or because they believe that losing weight will help them run faster. But eating too little over a period of time can be emotionally and physically harmful. Rather than helping you to run faster, it may ultimately cause you to stop running altogether.

### ANOREXIA NERVOSA

Athletes with anorexia nervosa think about food and calories all the time. They start by skipping a few meals and gradually cut down on carbohydrates and rarely eat any fat. They are afraid that if they eat normally, they will not be able to compete at the same level in sport.

This fear means that they are constantly judging themselves against other athletes. They want to be better than everyone else in a race or competition. Very often, they are deeply afraid that their coach, parents or fellow athletes will not approve of their running performance.

Often they may do too much training. Some try to run further and harder than ever before each time they go out. They push themselves to extreme physical limits to lose weight and punish their bodies. As their weight drops, they feel a sense of achievement. At this stage they seem to have endless energy and feel that they can't keep still. This is the body's way of encouraging them to find food, but the signal is often misunderstood and they become more active.

However, as they lose more weight, their athletic performance drops. They feel too tired to train and become depressed and weak. Because they no longer have the energy to run with friends, they feel isolated, sad and sometimes suicidal.

They may feel that no one around them understands. However much they try to stay in control, in reality they have lost control because their concern about weight and food is controlling them. For these athletes, losing fat is the challenge, and food becomes the opponent in the race for thinness.

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beat is the working title of Eating Disorders Association

Company number: 2368495 Registered Charity Number: 801343  
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The long-term effects of under-eating can be devastating. Anorexic athletes may have to stop running because their bodies become too weak to support them. In females, periods may stop or become irregular. Their bones may become brittle, a condition known as osteoporosis, and they may suffer repeated injuries and stress fractures.

## **BULIMIA NERVOSA**

Athletes with bulimia nervosa also want to be thinner than their rivals. They put themselves on diets which are far too severe. But when they get panicky, perhaps near to an important race, they eat as much food as they can as quickly as possible. They may binge when they feel they have lost control, for example if they have broken one of their own or perhaps a coach's diet rule.

Afterwards, they feel physically and emotionally sick. They are ashamed and disgusted by their behaviour and want to keep it a secret. Often they tell themselves that they will never make it to the top in sport if they lack the discipline to stick to their strict diet. So, they starve themselves for a few days or purge their body of food by vomiting or using laxatives to get rid of the large amounts of food they have eaten. And so the cycle starts again.

Many athletes with bulimia nervosa appear to be gregarious and able to cope with any amount of training. But inside they feel worthless and vulnerable. They think that people wouldn't admire them for their sporting achievements if they really knew what they are like. They feel trapped in a cycle of bingeing and then punishing themselves, with no escape. Repeated use of laxatives and making themselves sick can seriously damage their health. They may experience tooth decay, bad breath, throat infections, dehydration, kidney and bowel problems. Like anorexia, bulimia can be fatal.

## **WHERE TO GET HELP**

Eating disorders can be very serious. In some cases they can result in death. If you think you may have problems with your own eating habits, it is important to ask for help.

It is difficult for athletes with eating disorders to get better on their own. Although they may have determination and willpower, it is often not enough. You may need professional help and support.

Asking for help is never easy. You may be afraid that others will be angry with you. You may also fear that you will lose the control you feel you have over life through your eating and running.

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But there are several steps you can take:

- Find someone you trust and can talk to openly about your difficulties. This may be a coach, a fellow athlete, a parent or teacher.
- Phone the *beat* helpline (see below for details). All calls are confidential.
- Seek help quickly. The longer you leave the problem, the longer you will remain trapped and isolated. You will also find that your performances start to deteriorate.
- If there is no one close to you that you can talk to, try contacting a counselling agency. The Eating Disorders Association has a list of counsellors who can offer help. Alternatively, you can see your doctor, who will give you a medical assessment. He may offer you treatment through regular appointments or refer you to a specialist.

The earlier you seek help, the sooner you can begin the road to recovery. As a result of recovering you can gain new confidence and begin to realise that there are other ways of coping. Never give up hope. Eating disorders can be beaten.

#### OTHER LEAFLETS IN THIS SERIES

- *Help for coaches*
- *Help for relatives and friends*

This leaflet was produced in conjunction with UK Athletics

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*beat* is the leading UK wide charity providing information, help and support for people affected by eating disorders- anorexia, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder.

Details of local contacts are freely available to callers ringing our helplines.

*beat* services and support include:

- **Helplines:** national telephone, e-mail and text help-lines
- **Self Help:** UK wide network of groups run by volunteers
- **Information:** a website at [www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk) leaflets and literature for individuals and organisations details and contacts for treatment services in the UK
- **Training:** courses and conferences for health, education and social care staff
- **Research:** support for academic and clinical studies, and research trials

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