

A Coach's Guide

Food and diet are an important part of any athlete's training and competitive programme. For an athlete in any sport to perform well, they must get an optimum balance of nutrients and energy to support the amount of exercise they do.

Experimenting with diet is common in sport. Searching for the ultimate sports diet to improve performance is perfectly normal.

However, some athletes develop eating habits which will not only put their sports performance at risk, but can also endanger their health. As a coach, you may be aware that eating disorders exist in your sport, but may not know how to spot the warning signs and the best way to approach an athlete you suspect has problems with their eating.

Some of my athletes want to diet. Should I let them?

Only if the athlete is significantly overweight. Any diet should be compiled and monitored very carefully, ideally by an accredited sports dietician.

A diet that results in more than 1-2 lbs weight loss per week will cause loss of muscle mass. Weight loss and consequent performance should be monitored carefully.

Can an athlete really be too thin?

Yes. Ultimately, training and competing at a very low body weight with insufficient energy and nutrient intake can be dangerous and even fatal.

At the very least, the long-term effects of under-eating may cause a drop in performance and an increased risk of stress fractures. Ultimately it could mean that an athlete has to stop running or competing altogether.

Are eating disorders common in athletics?

Yes. Recent research shows that eating disorders are much more common in some sports, like distance running, than in others. The causes are never straightforward and differ with every case. In some cases athletes may develop anorexia because they see weight loss as a means to better performance (i.e. running faster); in others, people with anorexia become runners because they see it as a means to faster weight loss. But not every athlete who diets will develop an eating disorder, just as thin runners are not necessarily anorexic. But it is important to be aware that the problem is out there and, if possible, to spot it in the earliest stages.

103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW
Admin T: 0300 123 3355 Media T: 0300 123 7061 F: 01603 664915
E: info@b-eat.co.uk W: www.b-eat.co.uk

Helpline: 0845 634 1414 Youthline: 0845 634 7650

beat is the working title of Eating Disorders Association

Company number: 2368495 Registered Charity Number: 801343
Scottish Charity Number: SCO39309

Are there obvious signs I can look for?

An athlete will do their best to keep an eating disorder a secret for as long as possible. However there are physical and emotional signs to look out for - see the panel overleaf.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SIGNS OF...

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

Physical Signs

- severe weight loss
- periods stop or are irregular
- the athlete has difficulty sleeping
- s/he suffers frequent dizzy spells
- s/he complains of stomach pains, constipation or says s/he "feels bloated"
- there is a growth of downy hair on her/his face, legs, arms
- s/he complains about feeling cold

Psychological Signs

- an athlete insists that they are fat when they are actually underweight
- s/he is irritable
- s/he sets herself unreasonably high standards
- s/he becomes obsessed with training harder and longer
- s/he wants to run alone
- s/he is more aware of food and calories

Behavioural Signs

- s/he starts exercising excessively
- you suspect s/he is lying about eating meals and s/he refuses to eat in company
- they willingly supply food for others

BULIMIA NERVOSA

Physical Signs

- s/he suffers frequent dehydration even when s/he isn't training or competing
- s/he has dental and gum problems
- s/he has extreme weight fluctuations
- she reports menstrual irregularities
- s/he complains about muscle cramps and weakness
- s/he has swollen salivary glands at the side of the face
- there are abrasions on the back of her/his knuckles from induced vomiting

Psychological Signs

s/he:

- suffers depression
- becomes increasingly self-critical, especially about their body and performance
- has noticeable mood swings

Behavioural Signs

s/he:

- eats large quantities of food and is sick after meals
- starts diets which are unnecessary for appearance, health or performance
- visits the toilet or 'disappears' after eating
- takes laxatives or diuretics
- steals food and laxatives
- becomes secretive and lies about eating

103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW
 Admin T: 0300 123 3355 Media T: 0300 123 7061 F: 01603 664915
 E: info@b-eat.co.uk W: www.b-eat.co.uk

Helpline: 0845 634 1414 Youthline: 0845 634 7650

beat is the working title of Eating Disorders Association

Company number: 2368495 Registered Charity Number: 801343
 Scottish Charity Number: SCO39309

I think they may have an eating disorder

Even if you're sure that an athlete has an eating disorder, they may not be willing to acknowledge it at first. Accept that they will probably deny a problem and may react badly, whichever approach you take. But don't let this deter you if you feel your suspicions are right.

Be prepared to listen and give time. Let them know that you are there if they want to talk to you. Your athlete will need support. They will want to feel accepted not just for their performance in sport, but for their existence as a person. Low self esteem is a common characteristic within an eating disorder

Should I seek professional help for him or her?

Only with their agreement. However, an athlete with an eating disorder will need to get professional help and support. It may be that by listening and being supportive, you can help them take the first step and encouraging them as they recover.

How do I support them as they get better?

The best way to help is to develop trust and friendship by being open, honest and supportive. However, recovering from an eating disorder can be painful and frightening. It will be difficult for them to hear comments from training partners like: "You are looking better", or "good, you are putting on weight". Their reaction is likely to be, "Oh no, I am getting fat I will never be a good runner again - help - if I don't lose weight quickly I will get fat and slow."

Can I prevent eating disorders in my group of athletes?

Although sport is never to blame for causing an eating disorder, there are some ways in which it may cause an eating disorder to develop in a predisposed athlete. As a coach, you should be aware of the following factors:

- Remember that weight is largely determined by genetics, and that bodyweight is only one of many components of overall fitness. Do not place too much emphasis on weight. Group 'weigh-ins' should therefore be avoided.
- Percentage body fat varies between individuals, but there is no ideal weight for any event. The top performer in an event may happen to be one of the thinnest, but this is not necessarily the reason for their success.
- Careful thought should be given to the value of measuring body fat in endurance athletes.
- Remember too that athletes are naturally very competitive. Avoid extending this competitiveness to include bodyweight or body fat percentages.
- Finally be aware that eating disorders can 'spread' among the members of a training group. If one athlete loses weight, another may attempt to copy them; or if a naturally thin athlete is performing well, the others may think weight loss is the answer. Each athlete is different, so treat them individually.

103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW
Admin T: 0300 123 3355 Media T: 0300 123 7061 F: 01603 664915
E: info@b-eat.co.uk W: www.b-eat.co.uk

Helpline: 0845 634 1414 Youthline: 0845 634 7650

beat is the working title of Eating Disorders Association

Company number: 2368495 Registered Charity Number: 801343
Scottish Charity Number: SCO39309

This leaflet was produced in conjunction with UK Athletics

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 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

Eating disorders will be beaten

103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW
Admin T: 0300 123 3355 Media T: 0300 123 7061 F: 01603 664915
E: info@b-eat.co.uk W: www.b-eat.co.uk

Helpline: 0845 634 1414 **Youthline:** 0845 634 7650

beat is the working title of Eating Disorders Association

Company number: 2368495 Registered Charity Number: 801343
Scottish Charity Number: SCO39309