

Eating Disorders: Telltale signs are in the mouth



Maybe you can hide an eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa from your family and friends for a while, but you can't hide it for long from your dentist. Telltale signs appear early in and around the mouth.

The oral effects of an eating disorder are easily recognizable despite the secretive nature of the disease. Sometimes the dentist may be the first to know and can encourage a patient to seek appropriate help before severe tooth and other health damage can result. Increasingly, dental care is becoming an important part of a coordinated treatment plan for those suffering from an eating disorder.

Oral signs of eating disorders

According to the National Institutes of Health, women are 8 to 10 times more likely to suffer from bulimia and anorexia than men. It is estimated that bulimia affects from 1 to 3 percent of teenage and young women, and anorexia affects .5 to 1 percent.

Bulimia is an eating disorder that involves secret repeated binge eating followed by purging — self-induced vomiting, use of laxatives, fasting, diuretics or diet pills. Bulimia harms your overall health and is particularly destructive to teeth:

- When repeated vomiting is used to purge food from the body, the strong acids in the digestive system can severely erode tooth enamel, and teeth become worn and translucent.
- Your mouth, throat and salivary glands may become swollen and tender.
- Bad breath may occur.

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- Repeated exposure to gastric acid from vomiting can cause sores to appear in the corners of the mouth.

Anorexia is an eating disorder that is manifested as an intense fear of weight gain and the desire to be thinner. It is self-induced starvation. Anorexia Nervosa may produce some of the same oral symptoms as bulimia.

Both of these eating disorders rob the body of adequate minerals, vitamins, proteins and other nutrients needed for good health causing potential injury to teeth, muscles and major organs.

Note: It is important to recognize that gastroesophageal reflux disorder and even morning sickness in pregnant women also can bring up stomach acid that can harm teeth.

What to expect at the dentist

- The dentist may encourage you to seek professional help for the eating disorder.
- Permanent restoration of damaged teeth may prove ineffective unless you get treatment for the eating disorder.

- To prevent further tooth damage, the dentist may create a mouth guard that covers the teeth to help protect them from further erosion by stomach acid.
- Ask your dentist about fluoride treatments to protect your teeth.

To keep your teeth healthy

In order to neutralize the effects of stomach acid on your teeth you should:

- Immediately after purging, rinse your mouth with baking soda mixed in water, or with a sugar-free mouth rinse, or with plain water if nothing else is available.
- Brush daily with soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste.

Eating disorders can cause very serious harm to your body as well as to your teeth and smile. Oral care instructions from your dentist can help prevent tooth damage from worsening. But most importantly, seek professional help to treat the underlying causes of the eating disorder.

