Am I bulimic, or is it just a phase? [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a college freshman and I think I’m on my way to becoming bulimic. Since my junior year of high school, I have periodically binged and tried to purge, but I was never really successful and it was never frequent. My senior year I made myself semi-successfully throw up for the first time, but it was gross and scary and made my throat bleed and I stopped. However, since I’ve gotten to school this year, I feel like things have gotten out of control. I started out eating healthfully and losing weight, because I am about 15 pounds overweight and need to make a lower weight class for my sport. (I am at a high level and compete internationally.) I’m also terrified of the "freshman fifteen" since I’ve always been chubby at the least. I couldn't keep up my healthy eating and snapped, and now I binge all the time and for the past few weeks have been throwing up. I think I could stop but I’m not sure. Am I bulimic or just going through typical freshman food phase?

Thanks for any advice.

? Not sick... yet?

Answer

Dear Not sick... yet?,

Smart of you to ask about this, since what may seem to be a phase has the potential to spiral into a harmful situation with serious health consequences [2]. Ideally, each person’s relationship with food would be as exciting, positive, and simple as is profiled in commercials and other forms of media. But, as you illustrate, other factors, such as issues with body image, pressures to fit athletic goals, or social norms around weight gain or loss often makes this relationship complicated or even unhealthy [3]. Only a professional can diagnose eating disorders, such as bulimia. Regardless, while college students may experience changes in their eating routine while adjusting to a new school and day-to-day routine, bingeing and purging isn’t typical behavior. Working through concerns about your body image, athletic goals, eating behaviors, and relationship to food will hopefully help you feel healthier, happier, and more confident as you adjust to school and college athletics.

Weight gain during the transition to college, colloquially referred to the "freshman fifteen," is often profiled as ranging from a rite of passage to a terrifying and isolating obstacle. However, one study found that students actually gain an average of 2.7 pounds (1.2 kilograms), not 15 pounds. Most of this weight gain is due to an increase in meal size and a decrease in the
amount of physical activity they get. Therefore, the popular belief of gaining fifteen pounds as a first year student is likely inaccurate.

It's also helpful to think about why you're setting a specific goal weight. Depending on your sport, perhaps you could reconsider the weight at which you compete. Successful athletic competition at high levels takes a strong foundation of proper training, appropriate nutrition, and adequate rest. Bingeing and purging is not a healthy or sustainable way to establish competition weight, and may impact your overall well-being, making it harder for you to compete at the same level you have been.

Working with a registered dietitian or your coach could help you establish a balanced eating plan that will give you the strength and energy to support your athletic goals as well as help you manage your body weight. Your school's student health center or athletic department may offer this service. If not, they may be able to arrange for a consultation or a referral. It's also a good idea to have a medical check-up by a health care provider to be sure you're physically healthy.

As you embark on this path of behavior change, it may be wise to visit your school's counseling center to discuss your body image concerns. They may be able to help you figure out where your negative feelings may have started and explore what messages have influenced your perception of your body. Again, if this service isn't available on campus from your campus health services, ask for a referral for an off-campus provider. The sooner you seek support and more sustainable ways of maintaining a healthy weight and self-perception, the quicker you may find relief and the better you may begin to feel. In the meantime, check out other related questions to learn more about disordered eating in the Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders [4] section of the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity [5] archives.

Here's to moving towards a healthy, nourishing relationship with food and physical activity,

Alice!
Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [5]
Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders [4]
Weight Gain & Loss [6]

Related questions

Do I have an eating disorder? [7]
Dancer thinks she may have an eating disorder [8]
Online eating disorder support resources [9]
I want to recover from my eating disorder and need to learn how [10]

Resources

Columbia Health Eating Disorders Team (Morningside) [11]
Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [12]
Medical Services (Morningside) [13]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [14]
Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUMC) [15]
Medical Services (CUMC) [16]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [17]
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