

The Early Signs

As an athlete's coach you have a duty of care for your athlete, it is important that you can identify the early signs of an eating disorder so you can help the athlete start the recovery process.

The main early signs of anorexia are:

- Dramatic weight loss
- The athlete lies about how much they have eaten that day and how much they weigh.
- The gymnast doesn't want to eat with other people.

The main early signs of bulimia are:

- Mood changes
- Going to the bathroom after eating
- Eating a lot of food very fast

The main early signs of binge-eating disorder:

- Eating a lot of food very fast
- Trying to hide how much they are eating

Where To Go For Help

It can be difficult as a coach to know what to do if you think your athlete has an eating disorder. Eating disorders are more common in athletes than non-athletes and there are a number of hotlines you can call if you need advice on the next step.

Beat Eating Disorders Adult- 0808 801 0677

Beat Eating Disorders Child- 0808 801 0711

National Centre For Eating Disorders –
0845 838 2040

SEED Eating Disorders – 01482 718130

Some athletes may also feel comfortable in speaking to a doctor.

It is likely that eating disorders will always be present within gymnastics. However with the right information gymnasts can receive treated before their condition worsens and they can become body confident and strong again.

Eating Disorders In Gymnastics

A Coaches Guide



Samantha Guild

What Is An Eating Disorder?

An eating disorder is a mental health issue where someone has an unhealthy relationship towards food, if someone has this it can make them very ill.

The three most common eating disorders are:

- Anorexia Nervosa
- Bulimia Nervosa
- Binge Eating Disorder

Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia is where those suffering often eat very little and exercise too often. People suffering from anorexia often see themselves as fat when they are in fact underweight. Although anyone can become anorexic, it is most common in teenage girls.

Bulimia Nervosa

People who suffer from bulimia tend to binge eat over a short space of time this is followed by purging, getting rid of the food consumed. People suffering from bulimia will often either make themselves sick, take laxatives and exercise too much in an attempt to stop gaining weight.

Binge-Eating Disorder

Sufferers of binge-eating disorder eat large amounts of food until they feel too full, after this individuals will experience feelings of guilt or shame.

What Are The Effects Of An Eating Disorder?

If eating disorders are not identified early enough or if it is not properly treated it can leave the gymnast with long-term health problems, this might not only impact the gymnastics career but their health.

Health problems include but are not limited to osteopenia and osteoporosis, both of which are a result of anorexia. These conditions can weaken a gymnast's bones making them more likely to break or fracture which is not ideal for a gymnast who requires strength.

In severe cases if an individual has an eating disorder it can lead to death. It is important that coaches can identify the early signs of an eating disorder so the athlete can receive help before it's too late.



Why Might A Gymnast Develop An Eating Disorder?

It has been found that elite female gymnasts are more likely than other athletes to develop an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are most common in teenage adolescent girls, this is also the same age most gymnasts are when they perform an elite level.

Gymnasts who have an eating disorder are likely to have a warped image of what their body looks like, e.g. seeing themselves as fat when they are slim. Many gymnasts have developed this idea because of negative comments which have been made by the media, judges or their coach.

As a gymnast spends most of their day with their coach, coaches have a huge impact on their gymnast's life, therefore coaches should be careful with the language they use when discussing the athlete's body.