

Eating Disorders

The estimated prevalence of eating disorders and/or disordered eating among athletes in general ranges from 0-19% in men and from 6-45% in women. These figures are higher than in non-athletes. (1)

Eating disorders can be described as disturbance of eating and related behaviours including excessive restriction, compulsive exercise, and/or bingeing and purging. It is important for athletes to seek balance in their relationship with food, as this impacts all aspects of physical and mental health.

Signs and Symptoms

- Obsession with food and exercise
- Denying self of food to the point of starvation
- Binge eating and purging behaviours
- Compulsive exercise beyond what is good for sport performance and health
- Social withdrawal
- Persistent fatigue despite a consistent training regime
- Irritability and/or emotional volatility
- Avoidance of eating in public

What athletes can do

- Recognise signs and symptoms (refer to the SMHRT) and seek help early from a sports dietician, eating disorder specialist, team physician, psychologist and/or licensed mental health provider
- Accept yourself. It is important to understand that the "ideal" body weight of each individual differs because of variations in genetic traits and cultural norms
- Prioritise fuel as performance equipment, just like skis, wax, or rifle setup
- Understand that energy availability affects accuracy and calmness, not just speed
- Find support with others recovering from an eating disorder
- Familiarise yourself with support resources in your home country

What coaches and support staff can do

- Recognise signs and symptoms (refer to the SMHRT) and promote early help seeking behaviour from a sports dietician, eating disorder specialist, team physician, psychologist and/or licensed mental health provider
- Avoid comments about weight, body composition, or appearance
- Ensure adequate food availability during camps, cold-weather training, and travel
- Normalise multidisciplinary support; not as failure, but as elite best practice
- Know your National Federation's written mental health referral protocols

Remember:

Fueling is not about body weight - it is about accuracy, resilience, and career longevity. Eating well is part of being a competitive athlete.

(1) This factsheet is intended for education and performance support. It does not replace individualised psychological care where needed. IOC Mental Health in Elite Athletes Toolkit, 2021. Other content adapted from NCAA and NAMI.