

# Myths about Eating Disorders

## Myth #1

If a participant is performing well in sport, they can't have an eating disorder

### Truth

Sometimes participants may still be able to perform well, despite having an eating disorder. For others, their performance can quickly deteriorate, as they are more likely to experience injuries and illnesses due to under-fuelling. It is important, however, not to assume good performance 'equals' good mental health. If you have concerns about someone then it is always a good idea to trust your instincts and explore further.

## Myth #2

It is ok for participants in physical activity and sport to have an unhealthy relationship with food

### Truth

Participants may have to pay more attention to what, and when they eat to ensure they are appropriately fuelled for their training and competition, and to ensure they can maximise their recovery. Disordered eating practices (e.g. restricting food intake, avoiding major food groups, fasting for long periods of time, bingeing or purging) are not just 'part of being an athlete' and may be indicative of a more serious underlying issue. If you are concerned that one of your participants has an unhealthy relationship with food, it is always worth exploring further and encouraging them to seek support.

## Myth #3

Athletes are less likely to suffer from an eating disorder than non-athletes

### Truth

Evidence suggests that athletes may be more likely than non-athletes to experience disordered eating or an eating disorder. For example, up to 20% of female athletes (compared to 10% of non-athlete females) and 8% of male athletes (compared to 0.5% of non-athlete males) may experience a clinical eating disorder. It is thought that being involved in sport exposes individuals to additional risk factors and pressures to achieve a certain body size and shape, which can help to explain why the prevalence of eating disorders is higher in athletic populations.

## Myth #4

Only participants competing in sports like gymnastics or diving are at risk of eating disorders

### Truth

Participants competing in all sports are at risk of eating disorders. There is some evidence to suggest that this risk is highest in sports where there is a heightened emphasis on appearance, weight, and shape. For example, the highest levels of eating disorders occur among participants competing in sports such as gymnastics or figure skating (where there is a strong emphasis on appearance) and those such as distance running or triathlon, where being 'lean' may be considered advantageous.

## Myth #5

Eating disorders are caused by being involved in sport

### Truth

Physical activity and sport are hugely positive experiences for many people and can be very important in promoting positive health and wellbeing. Eating disorders are complex and caused by a combination of many factors. The sporting environment may contribute towards an increased risk in eating disorders due to a greater focus on weight and appearance. The requirement to wear revealing clothing for competition may promote body comparisons and dissatisfaction, and participants may also be subject to greater monitoring of their body (e.g. weight and skinfolds) and critique than those outside of the sports context.

## Myth #6

Coaches and the wider coaching team can't do anything to support participants with eating problems

### Truth

Coaches and the wider coaching team have an important role in supporting those struggling with their eating. Given their close relationship, coaches can be among the first to notice changes in participants' demeanour and wellbeing. Signposting to support at an early stage is important to a quick recovery. Coaches can also have a key role in continuing to provide support such as helping them to navigate time away from sport, and facilitating their return following recovery. Coaches are not required to diagnose or treat eating disorders, but it may be helpful for them to be involved in the treatment journey and liaise with professionals about their return to activity.

## Myth #7

You have to look underweight to have an eating disorder

### Truth

Eating disorders can present in lots of different ways, and weight loss (sudden or gradual) is not necessarily a key feature of every eating disorder. There are lots of other ways in which eating disorders can manifest.

## Myth #8

Only girls can get eating disorders

### Truth

Eating disorders can affect anyone, at any age, of any background. Eating disorders do not discriminate.