Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders in Athletes

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

* Understand the signs, symptoms, and treatment protocols for various eating disorders in order to properly designate care.
* Body composition is not the “end-all” for overall health.
* Malnutrition can happen to athletes of any shape or size.
* Mental illness is a large part of the origin of disordered eating and must be treated on an individual basis.
* Practitioners should never feel pressured to treat disordered eating by themselves. A team approach of multiple disciplines is best.

Food is the vital fuel that permits athletes to train and perform. Regardless of their sport, athletes are bombarded with a bewildering variety of social messages about “healthy eating.” Some principles are sound, while others veer toward pseudoscience or are frankly dangerous. Those in the latter category tend to promote a causative association between categories of nutrition and disease states or performance boosts that have little or no bearing on reality or science. In this chapter, starting from the premise that athletes are susceptible to nutrition and performance messages, I will review how this makes them vulnerable to significantly disordered eating patterns. Disordered eating invariably leads to worse athletic performance, even if it might help in the short term, and can furthermore cause a number of medical problems not well recognized even by medical doctors. Even worse, disordered eating can lead to full-blown eating disorders, which carry the highest death rate of any mental illness.