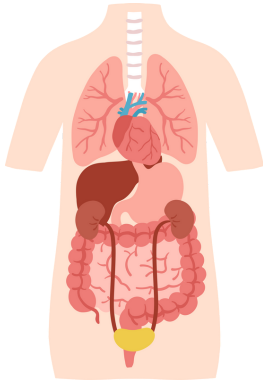


Restrictive Eating Disorders: The Health Risks

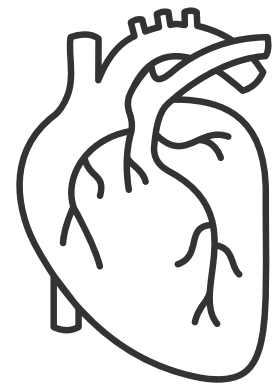


Restrictive eating disorders include multiple types of eating disorders and pose serious risk to a person's physical and mental health. Irreversible and life-threatening complications can occur if a restrictive eating disorder goes untreated by a licensed professional who specializes in eating disorder recovery. For this reason, it is important that anyone struggling with a restrictive eating disorder regularly consults with their pediatrician, primary care physician, psychiatrist, registered dietitian, and/or therapist to monitor and manage these risks. This information sheet will identify common health risks of restrictive eating disorders.

As the body endures semi-starvation (see handout on semi-starvation), every organ is harmed. This is especially true for the heart, brain, bones, and gastrointestinal (GI) tract.

Heart

When the heart is starved of calories, the heart begins to beat slowly at rest. The size of the heart muscle becomes smaller, weaker, and is less efficient at pumping blood throughout the body. This can cause a person to feel light-headed and dizzy with little exertion, like when standing up from a seated position. A person may feel tired, have sensitivity to cold temperatures, feel chest pain, or have an irregular heartbeat. In severe cases, heart problems can lead to sudden death. With gradual re-nourishment, the heart can return to normal function.



Brain

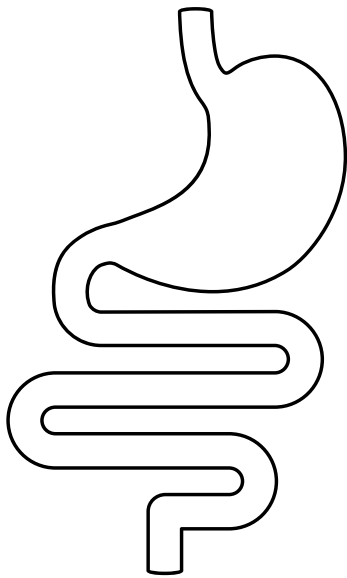
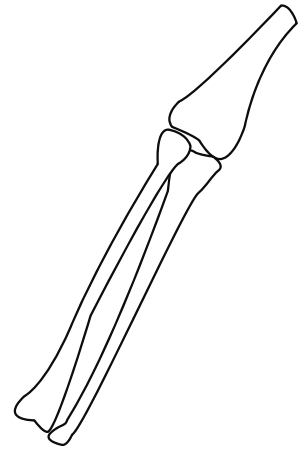
Just like the heart, the brain does not function properly when starved of calories. This is true even when a person goes on a modest diet. With a malnourished brain, it can be difficult to concentrate, make decisions, solve problems, regulate emotion, and have accurate perception (especially when it comes to body image and food). In severe cases, a person can lose grey matter in the brain which can be irreversible if the eating disorder goes untreated. With consistent and adequate nutrition, the brain can recover to normal function.



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Bones

Reduced bone density and stunted growth are often observed in individuals suffering from eating disorders. Insufficient body fat and dietary fat intake causes these bone irregularities. Adequate body fat is required for our body to regulate hormones that help our bones grow and stay strong. Dietary fat is required to absorb vitamins A, D, and K which are all involved in increasing and maintaining our bone mineral density. Growth stunting, abnormalities in sex hormones, and stress fractures are all signs potential signs of low bone density. If gone untreated, this can lead to osteopenia and osteoporosis.



GI Tract

Semi-starvation, malnutrition, and underuse of the GI tract can cause GI problems that include stomach pain, bloating, gassiness, lack of hunger cues, feeling extreme fullness, constipation, and diarrhea. Your GI tract has muscle that helps with digestion. When starved of calories and when the muscles are underused, they stop working properly. In addition, the balance of microbes in your gut can start to change. Through the renourishment process these symptoms can worsen temporarily, but with consistent and adequate nutrition, the GI tract can return to normal function.

It is important to note that It is possible to reverse the health problems associated with eating disorders. The key is to seek effective treatment early and to work with a treatment team that specializes in eating disorders.