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Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are real, complex, and often devastating conditions that can have serious consequences on your overall health and oral health. Telltale early signs of eating disorders often appear in and around the mouth. A dentist may be the first person to notice the symptoms of an eating disorder and to encourage his or her patient to get help.

What are the different types of eating disorders?

- Anorexia nervosa is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss.
- Bulimia nervosa is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by a cycle of bingeing and compensatory behaviors (i.e., self-induced vomiting, use of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas) designed to undo or compensate for the effects of binge eating.
- Binge eating is an eating disorder characterized by recurrent episodes of uncontrollable eating without the regular use of compensatory measures to counter the effects of excessive eating. Binge eating may occur on its own or in the context of other eating disorders.
- Pica is an eating disorder that is described as “the hunger or craving for non-food substances.” It involves a person persistently mouthing and/or ingesting non-nutritive substances (i.e., coal, laundry starch, plaster, pencil erasers, and so forth) for at least a period of one month at an age when this behavior is considered developmentally inappropriate.

How do eating disorders affect health?

Eating disorders can rob the body of adequate minerals, vitamins, proteins, and other nutrients needed for good health. Without the proper nutrition, gums and other soft tissue inside your mouth may bleed easily.

Frequent vomiting may affect teeth as well. Repeated exposure to strong stomach acid can cause much of a tooth’s outer covering (enamel) to be lost, resulting in changes to the teeth’s color, shape, and length. The edges of teeth may become thin and break off easily. Eating hot or cold foods or drinks may become uncomfortable. Repeated vomiting also can cause mouth sores, dry mouth, cracked lips, and bad breath.

How do dentists detect eating disorders?

Changes in the mouth are often the first physical signs of an eating disorder. Bad breath, sensitive teeth, and tooth erosion are just a few of the signs that may indicate whether a patient



might be suffering from an eating disorder. A dentist who determines that a patient has an eating disorder can refer the patient to the appropriate medical personnel, as well as teach the patient about how to minimize the oral effects of the eating disorder.

Can a person recover from an eating disorder?

Yes. Professional help, nutritional counseling, and having a good support network all play a crucial role in the recovery process. For more information, talk to your dentist or physician.