

JUST PICTURE THIS. Your office colleague tells you that she has stopped eating carbohydrates completely because she wants to lose weight. In a similar scenario, your brother always counts the number of calories before bingeing on a plate of *chhole bhature* or some slices of pizza and prolongs his morning walk the next day to make up for the 'unhealthy' food that he has consumed. You also hear about a friend who feels guilty every time he eats *samosas* or *jalebis* at a roadside stall — to the point of preoccupation.

Situations like these are revealing a new normal in today's world that doctors would like to refer to as 'disordered eating'. However, mind you, 'disordered eating' is different from 'eating disorder' that we all know of and hear often. So, what exactly is disordered eating?

The distinction between disordered eating and an eating disorder lies in the presence of a clinical diagnosis, says Dr Dinika Anand, clinical psychologist, BLK-Max Superspecialty Hospital, New Delhi. "Disordered eating may refer to occasional reliance on food as a coping mechanism or deviations from one's regular eating patterns in specific situations or circumstances. On the other hand, an eating disorder involves a clinical diagnosis, indicating a pervasive problem that extends beyond occasional behaviours or tendencies," she adds.

Disordered eating does not meet the typical criteria for an eating disorder, but it still holds potential consequences in both the short and long terms. "Additionally, it is worth considering disordered eating as a precursor to developing an eating disorder if one's eating patterns or disruptions are inconsistent with what is considered ideal or beneficial for their well-being," explains Dr Anand.

Earlier this year, Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow faced widespread criticism over her 'restrictive diet' that consists of mostly liquids. Experts labelled her diet as 'disordered eating' and said this kind of eating regime does not provide adequate nutrition or support optimal health.

In fact, disordered eating is becoming worrisome. In a recent study published in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics*, which involved 63,181 participants from 16 countries, 22% children and adolescents showed signs of disordered eating. The proportion was further elevated among girls, older adolescents and those with higher body mass index.

Worrying signs

Disordered eating encompasses a range of behaviours that resembles eating disorders but fall short of diagnostic criteria. "Symptoms include avoiding certain food groups, binge eating, extreme dieting, changes in weight, emotional eating and engaging in elaborate food rituals. It can also include abnormal behaviours and patterns similar to eating disorders, such as cleanses, diet pills, excessive exercise, and laxative abuse," says Dr Ravindra Srivastava, director, neurosciences, Primus Hospital, New Delhi. So, whenever we say disordered eating, it means that the caloric balance or nutritional balance of the food is not proper for that particular individual. "It may include the timing and amount of food that is taken into the system. Disordered eating is much more harmful in the sense that it can lead to lifestyle disorders like persistent weight gain that lead to abdominal adiposity," says Dr Harshal Ekampure, consultant endocrinologist, Ruby Hall Clinic, Pune.

And abdominal adiposity can predispose to the development of type 2 diabetes

mellitus, hypertension, which is increased blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels. "At the same time, this obesity can predispose the individual to an increased risk of vascular disorders like myocardial infarction or stroke, etc," adds Dr Ekampure.

Disordered eating may or may not lead to long-term mental and physical health issues. "However, the causes for this condition range from cultural influences and mental health conditions to stress, trauma and body image distortions. Therefore, recognising and addressing disordered eating is crucial to prevent further complications and promote overall well-being," adds Dr Srivastava of Primus Hospital.

Many people who suffer with disordered eating patterns either minimise or do not fully realise the impact it has on their mental and physical health, says Deepti Khatuja, head clinical nutritionist, Fortis Memorial Research Institute, Gurgaon. "Detrimental consequences can include a greater risk of obesity and eating disorders, bone loss, gastrointestinal disturbances, electrolyte and fluid imbalances, low heart rate and blood pressure, increased anxiety, depression and social isolation," she explains.

Disordered eating is a serious health concern that may be difficult to detect since a person with disordered eating patterns may not display all of the classic symptoms typically identified with eating disorders. "It's important to remember that even a person exhibiting disordered eating habits and behaviours also may be experiencing significant physical, emotional and mental stress," adds Khatuja.

Food for thought

Disordered eating, which encompasses a range of abnormal behaviours that do not meet the diagnostic criteria, is becoming a health concern, especially

GROWING CONCERN



■ Disordered eating may refer to occasional reliance on food as a coping mechanism or deviations from one's regular eating patterns in specific situations or circumstances

■ On the other hand, an eating disorder involves a clinical diagnosis, indicating a pervasive problem that extends beyond occasional behaviours or tendencies

■ Symptoms include avoiding certain food groups, binge eating, extreme dieting, changes in weight, emotional eating and engaging in elaborate food rituals

■ Disordered eating can also include abnormal behaviours patterns similar to eating disorders, such as cleanses, diet pills, excessive exercise, and laxative abuse

■ In a recent study published *JAMA Pediatrics*, 22% children and adolescents showed signs of disordered eating

■ The proportion was further elevated among girls, older adolescents and those with higher body mass index

■ Rather than following a restrictive eating pattern, eat mindfully when you are hungry following an 'intuitive eating' key to keep yourself physically, emotionally and mentally healthy

Fad diets to blame?

Fad diets cannot be solely held responsible for the development of disordered eating patterns. However, they do play a significant role, says Dr Anand of BLK-Max Super-

specialty Hospital. "In this context, it is a prevalent cultural tendency to stigmatise and attach negativity to certain food groups. Consequently, an individual's relationship with food is adversely affected, making it chal-