



African American Girls

This information sheet is designed to raise awareness of disordered eating and eating disorders among African American girls. It highlights findings from recent studies and provides suggestions for promoting positive body image and healthy eating behaviors among middle school African American students.

African American girls are at risk

Many people believe that only White girls are affected by eating disorders. In reality, no ethnic or socioeconomic group is immune to the dangers of this disease. Cases of eating disorders among diverse racial ethnic groups, including African Americans, are often underreported because studies typically do not include ethnically diverse populations.

After White Americans, African Americans comprise the ethnic and cultural group about which most studies on eating disorders are available. While there are no incidence or prevalence rates for eating disorders in the African American population, recent studies are providing clinical accounts of eating disorders in African American women.¹

Numerous studies have documented a high rate of eating disorder behaviors and risk factors, including body dissatisfaction among African American women.² More specifically, research demonstrates that binge eating and purging is at least as common among African American women as White women.³

Unfortunately, little work has been undertaken regarding differences in presentation of symptoms, cultural-specific risk factors, and effective treatment methods for African Americans.

The belief that African American women do not experience eating disorders contributes to the lack of



identification of eating disorder problems among this population. Since the early detection of an eating disorder is very important for its successful treatment, this misperception can result in serious health problems for African American girls.

African American girls are not immune to the pressure to be thin

The African American culture is more accepting of diverse body sizes and seems to favor a broader beauty ideal. This tolerance may help protect some African American girls from body dissatisfaction and low self-image.⁴

However, as Black girls approach adolescence, they become more concerned with thinness.⁶ Studies indicate



Voices of African American Women

“In our home, food was a source of nourishment, a sign of love, a reward and the heart of family celebrations. It was also a source of ambivalence, guilt, shame, and conflict. Our “family fat” issues descended into the same cavern of silence that housed my father’s alcoholism, gambling and willful disappearance from our lives. There was no talking about it and there were no tears.”

Georgiana Arnold, health educator

“Dieting is one of those last-ditch efforts to make everything all right in your life when that is not the cause of the problems to begin with. It is another coping device that keeps us in denial, that keeps us from getting to the core issues.”

Rosalee, administrator who began binge eating at age 4

“I hid my real self inside, very deep inside of a cave or a molecule or a cell. That is where I went. Another part of me that was sort of split off at the same time was the part that you would see...Eating was the cave, barrier, boundary, safety, and the buffer...like the science-fiction type stories where there are whole civilizations way under the earth. There was a room way under the cave that was all stone.”

Nicole, multicultural educator and trainer

(Excerpts taken from *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women’s Eating Problems*, by Becky Thompson.)

“By high school, I had learned to feed my desire for food, sometimes gorging myself on half a chocolate cake, hamburgers, ice cream, candy, and more, and I tried to control my weight by taking laxatives following my binges.”⁵

Victoria Johnson, African-American fitness professional

that when African American girls experience social pressure to be thin, they express the same type of body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness as White girls.⁷

Adolescents from middle-class African American families may be particularly vulnerable to the influence of the White beauty ideal. *Essence*, a magazine that caters to African American women, regularly runs stories on body size anxiety and eating disorders.⁸ A survey of its readers indicated that African American women appear to have at least equal levels of abnormal eating attitudes and behaviors as White women.⁹ Studies indicate that Blacks who identify with mainstream culture exhibit more eating problems, including dieting and fear of fat.¹⁰

Media targeting African Americans and other racial and ethnic and cultural groups in this country are increasingly embracing the beauty as thinness ideal. Black female stars in the music, film, and fashion industries are just as thin as their White counterparts.¹¹ The influence of these role models may contribute to body dissatisfaction and weight control behaviors among African American girls.

African American women experience high rates of obesity, a risk factor for eating disorders

Although the preference for a larger body size may help protect African American girls from body dissatisfaction and dieting, it can encourage obesity, which is also a risk factor for eating disorders. Black women are more than three times as likely as White women to be obese. Black women and girls are also less likely to exercise than their White counterparts.¹² African American families with low incomes are particularly at risk for obesity, due in part to a diet of food that is high in fat.¹³

African American girls are not likely to be heavier than White girls during childhood; but after adolescence their body mass index (BMI) surpasses that of White adolescent girls.¹⁴ This increase may be partially due to metabolic differences, since Black women and girls tend to have lower resting expenditures than their White counterparts.¹⁵ Weight gain during adolescence



may contribute to body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and eating disorders.

Black women who consider themselves heavier than the body ideal preferred by their culture, particularly those who are obese, may experience weight dissatisfaction and a desire to be thinner. Overweight women are more likely than women of normal weight to experience teasing, criticism, or discrimination.¹⁶ These pressures may contribute to binge eating, a disorder that is more common among people who have a history of obesity than others.¹⁷ People with this disorder eat a large amount of food in a short period of time and feel a lack of control over their eating.

Women who consider themselves thinner than the ideal may also be at risk for binge eating. These women may experience body dissatisfaction along with a desire to gain weight in order to approximate their cultural ideal.¹⁸

African American women engage in binge eating in high rates

The first large-scale epidemiological study of recurrent binge eating in Black women indicated that Black women were as likely as White women to report that they had engaged in binge eating and self-induced vomiting.¹⁹ More specifically, a greater number of Black women than White women reported that they had used laxatives, diuretics, or fasting to control their weight. Almost twice as many Black women as White women were identified as probable eating disorder cases. Recurrent binge eaters, regardless of race, are

Things You Can Do

As an adult working with adolescent girls, you can help identify those at risk, promote an environment that discourages negative body image and disordered eating behaviors, and prevent eating disorders among this population. Here are some ideas:

1. Provide adolescents with information on the benefits of healthy eating and regular physical activity.
2. Educate families about eating disorders. Provide them with copies of the “Parents” information sheet included in this packet.
3. Do not tolerate sexual harassment or teasing about another person’s body shape or weight.
4. Conduct media literacy activities that explore the images of thinness as beauty in television, magazines, and advertisements targeting girls.
5. Incorporate culturally appropriate materials, curricula, and interventions.
6. Refer girls who want to achieve a healthy weight to appropriate health professionals for information on healthy weight management strategies.
7. Help girls understand cross-cultural differences regarding body image and weight control.
8. Assist parents in accessing appropriate health care services.

overweight and report a greater number of psychiatric symptoms than those who do not binge eat frequently.²⁰ In addition, some researchers believe that racial prejudice and discrimination toward African Americans result in a sense of isolation that may contribute to binge eating.²¹

Health professionals must be prepared to respond to this specific health risk behavior and to address possible eating disorders in African American adolescents.



End Notes

¹ Crago, M., Shisslak, C.M., & Estes, L.S. Eating disturbances among American minority groups. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 1996, vol. 19, p. 239.

² Field, A.E., Colditz, G.A., & Peterson, K.E. Racial/ethnic and gender differences in concern with weight and bulimic behavior among adolescents. *Obesity Research*, 1997, vol. 5, p. 239; and Dounchis, J.Z., Hayden, H.A., & Wilfley, D.E. Obesity, eating disorders, and body image in ethnically diverse children and adolescents. In Thompson, J.K., & Smolak, L. (eds.). *Body image, eating disorders, and obesity in youth: Assessment, prevention, and treatment*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001, pp. 67-98.

³ Striegel-Moore & Smolak, The influence of ethnicity on eating disorders in women. In Eisler, R.M., & Hersen, M. (eds.). *Handbook of gender, culture, and health*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, pp. 227-253; and Dounchis et al., 2001.

⁴ Striegel-Moore, R., & Smolak, L. The role of race in the development of eating disorders. In Smolak, L., Levine, M.P., & Striegel-Moore. *The developmental psychopathology of eating disorders: Implications for research, treatment, and prevention*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996.

⁵ Crute, S, ed. *Health and healing for African Americans*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, Inc., 1997.

⁶ Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 1996.

⁷ Striegel-Moore et al., 2000.

⁸ Brumberg, J.J. *The body project: An intimate history of American girls*. New York: Random House, 1997.

⁹ Pumariega, A.J., Gustavson, C.R., Gustavson, J.C., Motes, P.S., & Ayers, S. Eating attitudes in African-American women: The Essence Eating Disorders Survey. *Eating Disorders: The Journal for Treatment and Prevention*, 1994, vol. 2, pp. 5-16.

¹⁰ Brumberg, 1997. (Note: The term "Black" is used when the studies cited included groups other than African Americans, such as girls or women from the Caribbean).

¹¹ Pumariega et al., 1994.

Definitions

Disordered eating refers to troublesome eating behaviors, such as restrictive dieting, bingeing, or purging, which occur less frequently or are less severe than those required to meet the full criteria for the diagnosis of an eating disorder.

Binge eating disorder means eating large amounts of food in a short period of time, usually alone, without being able to stop when full. The overeating or bingeing is often accompanied by feeling out of control and followed by feelings of depression, guilt, or disgust.

Overexercising is exercising compulsively for long periods of time as a way to burn calories from food that has just been eaten. People with anorexia or bulimia may overexercise.

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by cycles of binge eating and purging, either by vomiting or taking laxatives or diuretics (water pills). People with bulimia have a fear of body fat even though their size and weight may be normal.

Anorexia nervosa is self-starvation. People with this disorder eat very little even though they are thin. They have an intense and overpowering fear of body fat and weight gain

¹² Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 1996.

¹³ Dounchis et al., 2001.

¹⁴ Kumanyika, S. Obesity in black women. *Epidemiologic Review*, 1987, vol. 9, pp. 31-50.

¹⁵ Yanovski, S. Z., Reynolds, J. C., Boyle, A. J., & Yanovski, J. A. Resting metabolic rate in African-American and Caucasian girls. *Obesity Research*, 1997, vol. 5, pp. 321-325.

¹⁶ Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 1996.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Perez, M., Joiner Jr., T. E. Body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating in Black and White women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 2003, vol. 33, pp. 342-350.

¹⁹ Striegel-Moore, R.H., Wilfley, D.E., Pike, K.M., Dohm, F., & Fairburn, C.G. Recurrent binge eating in black American women. *Archives of Family Medicine*, January 2000, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 83-87.

²⁰ Striegel-Moore et al., 2000.

²¹ In Thompson, B.W. *A hunger so wide and so deep: A multiracial view of women's eating problems*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.