

## Eating Disorders Among the Elderly

As one ages, there are numerous life factors and alterations that may change the outlook a person has on themselves, such as bodily changes. Or perhaps, damaging life experiences at an earlier age, molded a pathway for complications to emerge later in life. Eating disorders in the elderly population are unfortunately overlooked. However when they do transpire, “significant morbidity and mortality result.” (2010), according to the International Psychogeriatric Association. Thus, it is a necessity ageism be put to rest so equality in eating disorder treatment can positively impact all age cohorts.

The elderly face unique challenges when it comes to eating disorder treatment and accurate diagnosis. Rollin, an associate at Eating Disorder Hope, explains that signs of an eating disorder in the early stages are typically missed by peers and loved ones, due to the stereotype of this disease predominantly affecting younger generations.

Warning signs to watch for:

- Hair loss and/or dental damage
- Gastrointestinal complications
- The desire to eat alone rather than with people
- Heart problems
- Behavioural changes after eating a meal, such as using the bathroom
- Increased sensitivity to cold

### Most Common Disorders in Elderly Population

Eating Disorders amongst the elderly that are most frequent include bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. A publication of cases, found in a literature review, states that 90% of people over the age of 50 struggle with **anorexia**, and 10% **bulimia**. The results also show that 69% of cases in the elderly are late-onset eating disorders.

### Contributing Factors to Each Disorder

There are more similarities than differences in the appearance of eating disorders between younger and older generations. Anorexia nervosa, being a dominant eating disorder among the elderly, can appear in various forms of behaviour including:

- Claiming one is full, feeling ill, or not hungry
- Purging behaviours
- Engagement in secretive behaviours
- Trouble with emotional and verbal expression

- May be experiencing family conflict
- Laxative use (more common with elderly individuals)

This list of behaviours is common between all age cohorts, with the use of laxatives gearing more towards older individuals.

The second most common eating disorder in the elderly, bulimia nervosa, impacts a tenth of the older population. Regardless of symptoms being common with all cohorts, there are more severe health risks involved as one ages. Even though this disorder brings about various dangers to a person's health, elderly individuals can experience severe heart complications when experiencing bulimia. In addition, laxatives, as stated above, are a popular purging tactic with this disorder and are unfortunately handed out freely in many care facilities.

### **Overall Impact**

As a final point, eating disorders in the elderly puts that population higher at risk because a large toll is taken on their bodily system, thus making the sickness quite severe. During the aging process, an individual will face many internal changes, compromising the resilience of their body's function in the long run with this disorder. It is a necessity that eating disorder treatment reaches all age groups and is accessible. Let's continue to spread awareness!

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