



DIABULIMIA

What is “diabulimia?”

“Diabulimia” refers to people with Type 1 diabetes who intentionally omit their insulin injections in an attempt to stay or become thin. Prior to a diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes, people find they inadvertently lose weight. However, upon diagnosis, a person with Type 1 diabetes is put on insulin. The weight that was lost quickly returns. Type 1 diabetes sufferers soon realize that reducing or manipulating insulin dosages leads to weight loss (but appetite and thirst do increase).

How many people have “diabulimia”?

Statistics on this type of eating disorder are scarce. Type 1 diabetes affects one in every 600 children or 21 million children and adults. Nearly one third of people with Type 1 diabetes also suffer from an eating disorder. “Diabulimia” tends to start in adolescence and is more likely to occur in women than in men. Teenage and young adult women with Type 1 diabetes are about 2 ½ times more at risk for getting an eating disorder than their non-diabetic counterparts. When a Type 1 diabetes patient is diagnosed, they are put on insulin and begin to gain weight. Soon, the individuals realize they can lose weight by skipping their insulin. Also, the need for a diabetic to be conscientious about what he/she eats can spiral into more of an obsession or compulsion that is common in people with disordered patterns of eating.

What happens to a diabetic who does not take his/her insulin?

Along with the health consequences associated with eating disorders such as anorexia, people with “diabulimia” are more likely to suffer the ravages of untreated Type 1 diabetes such as retinopathy where blood vessels in the eyes break or bleed, which can lead to blindness; neuropathy or nerve pain in the feet; renal failure or kidney disease; coma; and death.

What kinds of treatment methods are effective for people who are suffering from “diabulimia”?

At the Eating Disorder Center of Denver, we treat the whole person--body, mind and spirit, taking our cues from integrative medicine. This employs the most effective treatments from a variety of healthcare modalities. So, with all of our patients, whether they have “diabulimia,” anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder, we might use medications and/or vitamin or herbal supplementation as well as traditional talk therapy and anxiety reduction techniques, such as yoga or meditation. We also involve a multidisciplinary treatment team with dietitians, therapists, and medical doctors on staff.

How can someone determine if their loved one is skipping their insulin to lose weight?

For someone to have “diabulimia,” they must have Type 1 diabetes. The individual will exhibit symptoms such as unexplainable weight loss, lack of prescription refills for diabetic medications and lack of marks on fingers from finger sticks. They may display low energy and have high blood sugar levels, they may complain of chest pain, heart palpitations, muscle cramps and lower back pain, they may have frequent bacterial infections and they will urinate frequently. They will probably display a change in eating

habits or talk about being on a new diet. Also, the individual's physician will know something is wrong because tests would show that the diabetes is out of control.

How should loved ones approach someone they believe is suffering from “diabulimia”?

Approach the person in a non-judgmental way and don't get into a power struggle. Discuss the combined risks to the body from an eating disorder and untreated Type 1 diabetes. An endocrinologist could be a good source for information about these negative health effects. Seek help from treatment centers that are experienced with the special needs of eating disordered patients with Type 1 diabetes. Get help right away because the longer the behaviors have been taking place, the harder it is to treat and the more long-term, possibly irreversible physical damage has occurred. For more information on “diabulimia” or any other eating disorder complimentary assessment, call the Eating Disorder Center of Denver at 866.771.0861.