


Eating Disorders and Their Impact on Physical and Mental Health: An Updated Review

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ABSTRACT

Eating disorders represent a group of psychological conditions characterized by dysfunctional eating behaviors that significantly affect individuals' physical and mental health. This article aims to discuss the impact of these disorders on health, exploring clinical, social and psychological aspects. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder are the most prevalent conditions and their implications go beyond body weight, also influencing quality of life, interpersonal relationships and cognitive function. The discussion addresses the biological and psychological bases of these disorders, intervention strategies and existing gaps in the literature, highlighting the importance of a multidisciplinary treatment approach for recovery. It is concluded that greater investment in prevention, early diagnosis and accessible treatment is necessary to mitigate the effects of these disorders on the population.

Keywords: Anorexia; Eating disorders; Mental health; Physical health; Psychiatric disorders

Introduction

Eating disorders (EDs) constitute a heterogeneous group of psychiatric conditions characterized by persistent alterations in eating habits and an excessive concern with weight and body shape. These disorders affect millions of people worldwide, with increasing prevalence, especially among adolescents and young adults^{1,2}. While more common in women, they also significantly

affect men. The main conditions in this category are anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN) and binge eating disorder (BED), each with unique clinical characteristics and challenges for diagnosis and treatment. The impact of EDs on health is broad, encompassing both physical and mental aspects. Physically, severe malnutrition, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal and metabolic complications and increased mortality-particularly in

AN-are observed. In the field of mental health, these disorders are frequently associated with comorbidities such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and an increased risk of suicide³. Additionally, the social impact of these disorders includes isolation, difficulties in interpersonal relationships and reduced quality of life⁴. The etiology of EDs is complex and multifactorial, involving interactions between genetic, biological, psychological, sociocultural and environmental factors^{5,6}. Studies indicate that social pressures related to body image, amplified by unrealistic beauty standards promoted by the media and social networks, play a significant role in the onset and maintenance of these disorders^{7,8}.

Objectives

This article aims to explore the effects of EDs on physical and mental health, focusing on their clinical and psychosocial implications, as well as discussing current treatment and prevention approaches. It is expected that this work will contribute to advancing knowledge on the subject, highlighting the need for more effective and accessible interventions to mitigate the damage caused by these conditions.

Materials and Methods

A bibliographic review was conducted, analyzing articles published in the PUBMED, ScienceDirect and Scielo databases to support the study.

Discussion

Eating disorders have a significant impact on physical health. Anorexia nervosa, characterized by severe food restriction and intense fear of weight gain, can lead to extreme malnutrition, muscle atrophy, osteoporosis and organ failure. Bulimia nervosa, on the other hand, involves episodes of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting or laxative use, resulting in complications such as electrolyte imbalances, dental problems and gastrointestinal injuries⁹. Binge eating disorder, often associated with obesity, increases the risk of metabolic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases. From a mental health perspective, EDs are deeply linked to emotional and psychological issues^{10,11}. Depression is a common comorbidity, often exacerbated by low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. Anxiety is also frequent, especially in individuals with anorexia nervosa, who exhibit extreme perfectionism and a need for control. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between eating disorders and self-harming behaviors, as well as an elevated risk of suicide. Sociocultural factors play a crucial role in the development and maintenance of these disorders¹². The idealization of thin bodies and social pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty standards contribute to the emergence of dysfunctional eating behaviors, particularly among young people exposed to social media. Constant social comparison and the pursuit of external validation amplify body dissatisfaction and the risk of developing eating disorders.

In the therapeutic field, treating EDs is challenging and requires a multidisciplinary approach. Psychological interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), have proven effective in modifying maladaptive thoughts and behaviors. However, adherence to treatment is often hampered by patient resistance, especially in anorexia nervosa, where body image distortion makes it difficult to recognize the severity of the problem. Additionally, pharmacological approaches may be useful, especially in managing comorbidities such as depression

and anxiety. However, the effectiveness of medications in the direct treatment of EDs remains limited¹³. A combination of nutritional support, psychological therapy and medical interventions is essential for recovery. Despite advances in understanding EDs, significant research gaps remain, including the need for greater exploration of genetic and biological factors, as well as the development of more effective and accessible interventions. Furthermore, investing in prevention strategies that promote education about mental and physical health and combating the stigma associated with these disorders is fundamental^{14,15}.

Conclusion

Eating disorders represent a significant public health challenge, with profound impacts on physical and mental health. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder stand out as severe conditions that require specialized clinical attention and multidisciplinary support. The multifactorial nature of these disorders requires a comprehensive understanding of their causes, including biological, psychological and sociocultural factors. Prevention is a powerful tool in mitigating the impact of eating disorders, especially among vulnerable populations. Public awareness campaigns, educational programs in schools and regulations on media representation of body image can play a fundamental role in reducing risk factors.

For those already affected, the availability of quality treatment is essential. This includes nutritional support, psychotherapeutic interventions and medical care. However, many individuals face significant barriers to accessing these services, whether due to financial constraints, stigma or limitations in healthcare systems. Future research should focus on identifying biomarkers for early diagnosis, developing more effective treatments and expanding preventive approaches. Additionally, it is crucial to involve families and communities in supporting affected individuals, fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment. It is concluded that, although eating disorders represent a complex challenge, a combination of efforts in research, prevention and treatment can lead to significant advances in reducing their impact on society.

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