

Despite the wide array of physical symptoms and medical complications that accompany eating disorders (i.e. osteoporosis, electrolyte imbalance, heart failure, and gastric or esophagus ruptures), it is often the pain and discomfort related to dental complications that first causes patients to consult with a health professional.

Dental Complications of Eating Disorders

Dental hygienists and dentists are often the first health professionals to observe signs and symptoms of disordered eating habits. However, recent studies cite two deterrents to dental practitioners addressing eating concerns with their patients:

- Lack of knowledge of the scope and severity of eating disorders, and
- Lack of comfort in discussing their concerns or suspicions.

In spite of these deterrents, the role of dental practitioners in early detection, identification, and intervention is crucial. This information is being provided to enable dental practitioners to recognize the effects of eating disorders and talk with their patients about these concerns.

What Should I Say?

The following script provides basic guidelines for dental practitioners to initiate a conversation with a patient presenting signs of disordered eating. Conversations should take place in private, out of earshot of others. If the patient is a minor, talk to his or her parents first.

Introduce the Issue

- I am noticing (name the conditions) on your teeth, gums, tongue, throat, etc.
- This is something I have seen in individuals who engage in (name the behavior: e.g.: vomiting, consuming excessive diet soda, etc.).

Ask for More Information

- Can you tell me about any behaviors you may be currently engaged in that could be having this effect on your mouth?

Provide Resources

- Are you currently seeking professional help related to these behaviors?
- Because eating disorders impact your oral, mental, and physical health, it is very important to seek professional help from a counselor, medical doctor, nutritionist, support group, or some combination of these. For eating disorders information and treatment referrals, contact the National Eating Disorders Association at 800-931-2237 or visit www.NationalEatingDisorders.org

Discuss Next Steps

- While you are seeking help and establishing healthier eating behaviors, I would like to suggest some immediate options for improving your oral health (i.e. mouth guards, avoid brushing immediately after vomiting, etc.). Teeth have become translucent as stomach acid destroys inner portion, leaving a layer of thin enamel.