

# Recognizing and Addressing Disordered Eating as a Service Member

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Holistic health is important for peak performance among service members, ensuring not only physical fitness, but also mental resilience, emotional wellbeing, and optimal cognitive functioning to meet the diverse demands of the military.

## Disordered Eating vs. Eating Disorder

➤ **Disordered eating is characterized by irregular and unhealthy eating behaviors** or attitudes toward food and body shape that **may not meet the diagnostic criteria** for a specific eating disorder.

➤ **Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions** that involve severe and chronic patterns of disordered eating that **significantly impact physical health, emotional well-being, and daily functioning.**

Healthy Eating Habits	Disordered Eating Habits	Eating Disorder Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choosing food for hunger and preference</li> <li>• Body acceptance or neutrality</li> <li>• Eating socially without stress or concern</li> <li>• Absence of guilt or shame around eating</li> <li>• Eating a variety of foods</li> <li>• Honoring you body signals of hunger and thirst</li> <li>• Eat with spontaneity and flexibility</li> <li>• No fear foods or rules around eating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food choices strongly influenced by desire to maintain a certain weight or body type</li> <li>• Anxiety, shame, or guilt about food, weight, or body shape</li> <li>• Frequent checking of body, measuring, or weighing self</li> <li>• Increased body aches, exhaustion, and lack of energy</li> <li>• Think of food choices in 'good or bad' mindset</li> <li>• Avoiding events where food is served</li> <li>• Using a fitness tracker to meticulously track nutritional intake or physical activity</li> <li>• Change or loss of menses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vomiting, laxative use, intentional dehydration</li> <li>• Not eating enough to meet nutritional needs</li> <li>• Using dietary supplements, herbal products, or 'detoxes' for weight management</li> <li>• Use food (or restrictive eating) to cope with emotions</li> <li>• Tend to be secretive about food and eating behaviors, or minimize problematic behaviors</li> <li>• Compulsive exercise</li> <li>• Significant or rapid weight changes, especially in a short period of time</li> <li>• Very limited variety of foods in diet</li> </ul>

**Please Note:** There is overlap in Orange and Red symptoms. Please seek evaluation from a medical provider if you experience any symptoms.



# Disordered Eating in the Military

## Low Energy Availability:

*Undermines physical performance and recovery while impairing concentration and decision-making, which are crucial for operational readiness.*



*Image taken from: Red's Models - Mountjoy M, Ackerman KE, Bailey DM, et al. Br J Sports Med 2023;57:1073-1097 <https://thebalancedpractice.com/2023/06/22/intuitive-eating-to-eating-disorders-understanding-the-eating-spectrum/>*

## Risks and Operational Impact on Service Members

- 1** **Low Energy Availability:** Using intense and harmful measures for weight management can deprive your body of necessary fuel and nutrients, leading to a situation called low energy availability (LEA).
- 2** **When Does Low Energy Availability Occur?** LEA occurs when you don't get enough energy intake to meet the body's needs for basic functioning, which can cause you to feel weak, hungry, tired, or dizzy.
- 3** **Further Impacts of Low Energy Availability:** LEA can also lead to decreased muscle mass, impaired immune functioning, and decreased bone density, which can increase risk of injuries and fractures.
- 4** **Sex-Specific Impacts of Low Energy Availability:** LEA can disrupt hormonal balance, leading to menstrual irregularities in females and decreased testosterone levels in males.



# Disordered Eating in the Military

## Facts:

- An estimated 9% of the United States population, or 28.8 million Americans, will have an eating disorder in their [lifetime](#).
- [A 2021 study](#) reported that up to 1/3 of Veteran women and 1/5 of Veteran men report symptoms consistent with an eating disorder.
- Fewer than 6% of people with eating disorders are “underweight.”
- More individuals die from eating disorders than any other psychiatric disorder.
- The leading cause of death for someone with an eating disorder is suicide.

## Facts & Myths:

- **Myth:** *Eating disorders are only prevalent within specific groups in the military.*
- ✓ **Fact:** Eating disorders do not discriminate; they can affect individuals from all branches, ranks, ages, and ethnicities.
- **Myth:** *Eating disorders are solely about food and weight; they have nothing to do with emotions or trauma.*
- ✓ **Fact:** Eating disorders often stem from complex psychological, emotional, and environmental factors, including trauma, stress, low self-esteem, and societal pressures, highlighting the need for comprehensive treatment approaches.
- **Myth:** *You can ‘cure’ someone’s eating disorder by simply telling them to stop their behaviors.*
- ✓ **Fact:** Eating disorder recovery requires a comprehensive approach involving professional treatment, therapy, nutritional support, and ongoing care, recognizing that healing is a journey that varies for each individual.
- **Myth:** *It’s easy to spot signs of disordered eating in the military.*
- ✓ **Fact:** Disordered eating behaviors can often go unnoticed or be mistaken for typical military discipline, making detection challenging without proper awareness and training.
- **Myth:** *Eating disorders are a personal issue and do not impact unit cohesion or mission readiness.*
- ✓ **Fact:** Eating disorders can affect unit morale and cohesion, as individuals struggling with these issues may experience decreased performance, absenteeism, and interpersonal conflicts

## Resources

- Text WAVES to 741741
- Contact your ship’s EMH or PCM
- [Academy for Eating Disorders](#)
- [National Alliance for Eating Disorders](#)
- [Sea Waves](#)

## Help Yourself or a Shipmate

If you or someone you know is struggling with their relationship with food or their body, it’s important to talk about it and seek support. Reaching out for help is a strong and brave step towards healing.

*As vital members of our Navy team, your well-being is paramount. Your attention to nutrition and self-care plays a pivotal role in our readiness and ability to fulfill our duties with excellence.*