



Harris County Hospital District

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NEWS RELEASE

The Other Battle of the Bulge

HOUSTON (Feb. 22, 2007) – Every January, folks far and wide mark the beginning of the new year by fighting the battle of the bulge. They join the gym, swear off carbohydrates, or get on the bandwagon for the latest fad diet. But there’s another battle that is being fought year-round — the one against eating disorders.

Jessica was 13 years old when she was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. She had grown tired of friends and family constantly teasing and commenting about her size. Determined to lose weight, Jessica put herself on a diet.

“From one day to the next, I stopped eating all the foods I loved. I was determined to lose weight,” said Jessica. “I would only eat foods like salads and fruit, and my mom supported me. She would prepare my salads and grill my chicken, even if she was frying it for the rest of the family.”

Jessica started losing weight fast, but she wasn’t satisfied. She started eating less and less, and her family didn’t have a clue.

“I would pretend I was eating, but I would take food into my room and hide it in napkins so no one suspected,” said Jessica. “My mom commented a couple of times on how bad my room smelled. The food that I had hidden had gone bad.”

It wasn’t until Jessica’s mom investigated the foul smell coming from her room that she discovered her daughter’s problem and the two had an emotional confrontation. Standing well over five feet tall, Jessica weighed roughly 90 pounds.

Anorexia is a psychological disorder where persons starve themselves because they believe they are overweight, even after becoming extremely thin and even ill. They try to lose weight by depriving their bodies of food, abusing laxatives and diuretics, and exercising excessively.

“I lost a lot of weight early on, when I was eating healthier, but even after that I still felt fat,” said Jessica. “I would look in the mirror and I would see myself three times bigger than I really was. I hated taking pictures because of how I thought I looked. I thought I still looked fat, but in reality I looked like a stick. Now I realize this disease makes you see things that aren’t there.”

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While anorexia can affect anyone, it is most common among teenage girls, according to Dr. Michelle Schmidt, medical director of the adolescent clinic at Ben Taub General Hospital.

“Teenagers are at a point in their lives where a lot is going on and they’re under a lot of stress and a lot of pressure to look a certain way,” said Schmidt.

Another common eating disorder is bulimia nervosa. The main difference between anorexia and bulimia is that bulimics consume large quantities of food, up to 20,000 calories at a time, and then force themselves to vomit. Anorexics, on the other hand, starve themselves.

Individuals can secretly binge and purge many times a day. The foods most commonly used to binge are “comfort foods” like ice cream, cake, or cookies.

Signs that a person may have an eating disorder include:

- Preoccupation with one’s body or weight
- Strict dieting, uncontrollable eating or purging
- Refusal to eat in front of others
- Frequent visits to the bathroom after meals
- Vomiting
- Frequent use of laxatives or diuretics
- Mood swings, depression or anxiety
- Vigorous exercising or fasting
- Dental problems caused by frequent exposure to acidic stomach juices

Anorexia and bulimia can cause serious health consequences, like heart failure, stomach ulcers, and gastric problems. Some have even died from the ravages the diseases inflicted on their bodies. People with eating disorders are also at greater risk for suicide.

Jessica is now 16 years old and healthy. She meets with her therapist once a month, and has regular health check-ups.

“I feel so sad for the person I was back then,” she says. “My weight doesn’t define me in the same way anymore. Now, I want to maintain my weight so that I’m healthy, not because of what others think or because of how I look.”

The Harris County Hospital District is the public health care system for the nation’s third most-populous county. It provides more than 1.1 million health care visits each year to uninsured and underinsured residents of Harris County. The hospital district operates Ben Taub General Hospital, Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, Quentin Mease Community Hospital, and an extensive network of community-based clinics, health centers, and mobile health units.

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