To: Local Newspaper
From: Shelli Wolfe, Health Promotion & Preparedness
Central Michigan District Health Department
RE: Eating Disorders
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Eating Disorders: Basic Facts for Families

An eating disorder is an obsession with food and weight that harms a person's well-being. Although we all may worry about our weight sometimes, people who have an eating disorder go to extremes to keep from gaining weight. Eating disorders usually start in the teens but may begin as early as age eight. There are two main eating disorders: anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

People who have anorexia are obsessed with being thin. They do not want to eat, and they are afraid of gaining weight. They may constantly worry about how many calories they take in or how much fat is in their food. They may take diet pills, laxatives or water pills to lose weight. They may exercise to a great extent. People who have anorexia usually think they are fat even though they are very thin. They may get so thin that they look like they are sick.

Bulimia is eating a lot of food at once (called bingeing), and then throwing up or using laxatives to remove the food from the body (called purging). After a binge, some bulimics will fast (do not eat) or will over exercise to keep from gaining weight. People who have bulimia may also use water pills, laxatives or diet pills to "control" their weight. People who have bulimia often try to hide their bingeing and purging. They may hide food for binges. People who have bulimia are usually close to normal weight, but their weight may go up and down.

Doctors do not know exactly what causes eating disorders. Possible causes include feeling stressed out or upset about something in your life, or feeling like you need to be "in control."
Society also puts a lot of pressure on people to be thin. This pressure can contribute to the eating disorder.

It is healthy to watch what you eat and to exercise. What isn't healthy is worrying all the time about your weight and what you eat. People who have eating disorders do harmful things to their bodies because of an obsession about their weight. If it is not treated, an eating disorder can cause the following health problems:

- Stomach problems
- Heart problems
- Irregular periods or no periods
- Fine hair all over the body, including the face
- Dry, scaly skin

There is treatment for people with eating disorders. For people who have anorexia, the first step is getting back to a normal weight. If you're malnourished or very thin, you may be put in the hospital. Your doctor will probably want you to see a dietitian to learn how to pick healthy foods and eat at regular times. For people who have anorexia and bulimia, family and individual counseling is helpful.

There are some warning signs for anorexia and bulimia including: unnatural concern about body weight (even if the person is not overweight), obsession with calories, fat grams and food, and use of any medicines to keep from gaining weight (diet pills, laxatives, water pills).

Being informed about eating disorders and their signs may help parents to identify eating problems before they are advanced. For more information related to eating disorders, visit the National Institute for Health at http://www.nimh.nih.gov or the National Eating Disorders website at http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org.
This article has been brought to you by the Central Michigan District Health Department serving the residents of Arenac, Clare, Gladwin, Isabella, Osceola, and Roscommon counties.

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