

## **Eating Disorders and Substance Abuse**

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are disorders involving food, either radical restriction or extreme consumption. It is also not unusual for women and girls struggling with eating disorders to either abuse or become dependent on substances. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

### **Alcohol**

Typically those with restricting anorexia do not consume alcohol, due to its high calorie content. However, for those with bulimia and a sub-group of those with anorexia who also binge and purge, alcohol is frequently consumed, then eliminated through vomiting.

### **Caffeine**

This stimulant is often used by those with eating disorders. It is consumed in the form of black coffee or diet drinks to fill the stomach and stave off hunger. Caffeine also serves as a diuretic, and people with eating disorders confuse temporary fluid loss with actual weight loss. In addition, liquids in general are used by those with bulimia because self-induced vomiting is easier when the stomach is full of fluid.

### **Amphetamines and Cocaine**

These drugs are more commonly used by those with bulimia, but also used at times by those with anorexia. These substances are used because they suppress appetite and provide energy in the absence of adequate food intake.

### **Nicotine**

Nicotine is an appetite suppressant that can increase metabolism in females as much as 10%. It is not unusual for girls with eating disorders to take up smoking to control appetite in an effort to lose unwanted pounds.

### **Laxatives, Diuretics and Over-the-counter Diet Pills**

Laxatives and diuretics, like so many over-the-counter medications, are intended to address a specific medical need during a delimited time-frame. And although laxatives and diuretics are not often considered drugs of abuse or dependence, individuals can become dependent on them. With prolonged use, these people develop both tolerance and withdrawal, and can experience serious medical consequences, including death. A study in 2003 found that in a sample of 200 bulimics, 31% used diuretics.

It may be a surprise to many people, including some healthcare providers, that over-the-counter products and supplements for dieting purposes are frequently abused by those with eating disorders. But, in fact they are. For example, in the study mentioned above, a full 64% of eating disorder patients abused diet pills. The health consequences of diet pill abuse are enormous and include high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms, tremors, thickening of the heart muscle and kidney damage.