

Orthorexia nervosa - when healthy eating is no longer healthy

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A new type of eating disorder is emerging where people are becoming obsessed with eating to improve their health. According to the Swiss Food Association, this new wave of nutritional obsession, known as 'Orthorexia' or 'Orthorexia nervosa', from the Greek "orthos" meaning right and correct, and "orexis" meaning appetite, is reaching worrying proportions.

In a quest to cure themselves of a specific disorder, or simply just taking healthy eating to extremes, orthorexics develop their own increasingly specific food rules. Working out how to stick to their self-imposed dietary regimen takes up more and more of their time and they are compelled to plan meals several days ahead. They tend to take a 'survival kit' of their own food with them when they go out, as they cannot eat readily available foods for fear of fat, chemicals or whatever their particular phobia might be.

Sticking to their regimen takes strong willpower and they feel self-righteous and superior to people who do not have such self-control. "Someone whose days are filled with eating tofu and quinoa biscuits can feel as saintly as if they had devoted their whole life to helping the homeless" states Dr. Steve Bratman, the man who initially described orthorexia back in 1997. By contrast, if the orthorexic breaks their health-food vows and succumbs to a craving for a 'prohibited' food, they feel guilty and defiled. This drives them to punish themselves with ever stricter dietary rules or abstinence. This behaviour is similar to those who suffer from anorexia or bulimia nervosa, except that anorexics and bulimics are concerned with the quantity of food consumed whereas orthorexics are concerned with the quality.

In Europe we are now bombarded with information about what is 'good' and what is 'bad' for us all the time. Food scares and the organic movement have added to the complexity of decisions people need to make about the food they eat. Dr. Bettina Isenschmid, consultant for food disorders at L'Hôpital de l'Isle in Berne, believes that this focus on good and bad foods is problematic and fuels an increasingly neurotic relationship with food in modern western society. Health is now an important consideration for many Europeans when menu-planning. How do we get the right balance between eating healthily and healthy eating obsession?

As with most aspects of diet, moderation is the key. Changes in food choices should be made gradually and in a way that fits in with a person's tastes and lifestyle. Eating more healthily should have a positive effect on health without reducing the enjoyment of life or affecting relationships with others. To check if someone has healthy eating in perspective, or is becoming obsessed, try the 'Bratman Test for orthorexia'.

Further information:

1. The French Institute for Health Education: www.ineps.sante.fr
2. The Swiss Food Association: www.sve.org
3. The Health Food Junkie by Dr. Steve Bratman extracts: <http://www.orthorexia.com/>

The Bratman Test for Orthorexia

- Do you spend more than 3 hours a day thinking about your diet?
- Do you plan your meals several days ahead?
- Is the nutritional value of your meal more important than the pleasure of eating it?
- Has the quality of your life decreased as the quality of your diet has increased?
- Have you become stricter with yourself lately?
- Does your self-esteem get a boost from eating healthily?
- Have you given up foods you used to enjoy in order to eat the 'right' foods
- Does your diet make it difficult for you to eat out, distancing you from family and friends?
- Do you feel guilty when you stray from your diet?
- Do you feel at peace with yourself and in total control when you eat healthily?

Yes to 4 or 5 of the above questions means it is time to relax more about food.

Yes to all of them means a full-blown obsession with eating healthy food.