

CPSP to unravel mysteries of bulimia in Canadian youth

Bulimia nervosa in Canadian children and adolescents is still not clearly understood, and the Canadian Paediatric Surveillance Program is an excellent collaborative tool to provide a national picture. A new CPSP study will collect national epidemiological data on bingeing and purging in children and youth ages 5 to 18 to advance knowledge about this condition.

“Often kids with bulimia don’t get identified. Parents don’t know that their kids are [bingeing and/or purging] because the sufferers aren’t help-seeking,” says Dr. Leora Pinhas, the study’s principal investigator and the psychiatric director of the Eating Disorders Clinic at The Hospital for Sick Children. “Only four per cent who binge and purge are seen by a physician,” she adds. “The goal of this study is to get a sense of who these kids are.”

Dr. Pinhas expects the study to identify at least 21 cases a year. This number will allow for detailed analysis of the presenting symptoms, she says. Investigators will also compile statistical evidence about patient age and social factors, which will aid in diagnosis and heighten physicians’ awareness of bulimia among children and teens.

The study reflects the times: Disordered eating is on the rise and has steadily increased since the 1970s, Dr. Pinhas says.

Not everyone in the field agrees on why this is, she says, though popular theories include biological predisposition and cultural environments that idealize low weight.

Bulimia nervosa is diagnosed based on recurrent binge eating—consuming an abnormally large amount of food within a two-hour period or less—coupled with other behaviours to prevent weight gain such as fasting, over-exercising or the misuse of laxatives.

Bulimia can cause heart problems, muscle weakness, decreased functioning of the gastrointestinal tract,

dehydration, hypotension and tachycardia among others. Mortality rates range from 0 to 6 per cent.

The study began in March 2008 and will run until February 2010.

“The CPSP has been amazing,” says Dr. Pinhas. “The program is a very important tool for Canadians to better understand child health. We are the envy of other countries.”

For more information visit www.cps.ca/cpsp or e-mail cpssp@cps.ca. 

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