

ORTHOREXIA

Are you consumed by healthy eating?

IT STARTS AS A FOCUS ON NUTRITIOUS FOODS CAN QUICKLY BECOME AN ORTHODOX DIET. HELEN WHITAKER INVESTIGATES A WORRYING TREND

WITH obesity at record levels, we can't open a newspaper without seeing another article on how we're cruising towards an early grave on a wave of junk food grease. So who would have thought being too health-conscious could be a dietary no-no?

While no one is suggesting we stop eating decent doses of superfoods, there is a growing number of people – known as orthorexics – who are so obsessed with eating healthily that they've developed an eating disorder.

Orthorexics are characterised not by a desire to be thin, but to be nutritious and "pure". Danger arises when this mission becomes all-consuming and eating "bad" food or skipping a workout results in extreme anxiety.

The term "orthorexia" was first coined in 1997 by Dr Steven Bratman, author of *Health Food Junkies: Overcoming The Obsession With Healthful Eating*, who describes it as a "disease disguised as virtue". Warning signs include spending more than three hours a day thinking about food choices, restricting food groups perceived as bad, and becoming socially isolated because of inflexible eating habits.

"What begins as a healthy lifestyle choice – say, choosing to eat only organic food, going vegan or following a raw food plan – can in extreme cases result in a form of anorexia," says Carolyn Costin, therapist and director of Monte Nido, an eating disorders

treatment centre in Malibu, California. She has treated four orthorexic patients in the past year alone. "They start rejecting more and more foods that are deemed to be 'impure' and their quality of life shrinks along with their weight and their meal plans."

Charlotte Hilton Andersen's orthorexia took hold when she tried to "become a little healthier" while pregnant in 2006. The 31-year-old nutrition enthusiast initially became a vegan. "But after three months it didn't seem like enough," she says. "I kept adding new 'rules', such as food needing to be organic and locally grown. Eventually I had so many rules I was only eating salad, some types of bean, and certain fruit."

Ironically, it is this pursuit of eating only the most "righteous" foods that can lead to malnutrition and health risks commonly associated with anorexia and bulimia, such as hair loss, osteoporosis and fertility problems.

Kristie Rutzel, 26, first became orthorexic at 18. "I read all the diet magazines and nutrition books and followed every conflicting piece of advice. There was something emotionally rewarding with knowing there were no toxins in my body, but

in two years I went from around 54kg to 30kg and was diagnosed with osteoporosis at 20." Kristie dropped out of college and was surviving on organic vegetables alone when her family and doctor sought hospital

treatment for her. After several relapses she now uses the nutrition pyramid to balance her diet and food groups and describes her diet as "much better".

Charlotte's battle with orthorexia saw her drop to her lowest adult weight and stop menstruating, but for her the most depressing part was the isolation.

"If I was invited to friends' houses I couldn't eat anything," she says.

"Even if they'd driven themselves crazy preparing a meal to my exact standards I didn't trust them, convinced it contained impure ingredients."

It is orthorexics' encyclopaedic knowledge of nutrition that Costin says makes the disorder hard to treat.

"They're very bright about the dietary quality of foods," she says, "You have to be prepared to go up against that in helping them to break the cycle. I tell them they're right about which foods are healthy and it's good not to have pesticides, but if you have a low heart rate and your bone density is screwed, you're not making a good case for organic living. You're not healthy."

So far, orthorexia hasn't been recognised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; Costin describes it as a "nuance" of anorexia rather than a disorder in its own right, but Charlotte disagrees.

Following her treatment, she believes it lies somewhere between an eating disorder and OCD. "We don't have the body dysmorphia that is a key component of anorexia and bulimia," she says. "I never thought I was fat."

However you classify the condition, it's a growing problem. "We talk about quality of life," says Costin. "If you're obsessing about where your food is coming from and how it's prepared, you can't date, go out with friends or take vacations. What have you accomplished in terms of a better life?"

In Tinseltown, some celebs are now relaxing their strict diets. Gwyneth Paltrow, the poster girl for healthy eating, is no longer macrobiotic, eats carbs, meat and even indulges her cheese weakness. We wonder what Madonna would say to that?

For eating disorder treatment, visit www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au

PHOTO: SHAPPER MEDIA

