Recognizing Eating Disorders

Problem

Patients with eating disorders may not present for medical care until late in the course of their diseases. Therefore, nurses should routinely assess for eating disorders, particularly in high risk groups such as adolescent and young adult females.

Consequence

A nurse who appropriately identifies a patient with eating disorders and facilitates suitable interventions may be able to save a life.

Solution

Here are some suggested ways to recognize potentially undiagnosed eating disorders.

- Eating disorders fall into two major categories: anorexia nervosa and bulimia; while these disorders are rather different, there may be an overlap between the two.

- Anorexia nervosa and bulimia can occur at any age and in either gender; however they are typically disorders of adolescent and young females.

- Eating disorders are more typically found in middle-class Caucasians.

- Anorexia nervosa is severe weight loss that is related to a patient’s perception of their body; despite significant loss of weight, these patients still perceive their body image as being overweight.

- Patient suffering anorexia nervosa limit their nutritional intake, use diet pills and laxatives excessively, exercise vigorously and may substitute water for meals.

- Symptoms of anorexia nervosa are significant weight loss, malnutrition, dry skin, amenorrhea and dehydration.

- Bulimia is a similar condition in that the patient’s body image is impaired, but the symptoms are different and the patients are usually overweight.
• Bulimia patients often experience “binge-purge” episodes where their hunger and craving for food leads them to eat large quantities of food.

• The “binge” in eating is often followed by a “purge” where forceful vomiting or excessive laxative or diuretic use is encountered.

• Bulimia patients show overt signs of vomiting or metabolic signs of purging.

• For suspected bulimia patients, examine the incisors for dental carries, which may result from the effects of hydrochloric acid from repetitive vomiting.

• Check for abrasions or scars on the hands from the use of fingers to precipitate vomiting through gagging.

• Bulimic patients who abuse laxatives or diuretics will experience metabolic effects from the overuse of these medications including hypokalemic, metabolic alkalosis.

• To assess for possible eating disorders, the nurse should assess nutritional history and emotional concerns like depression, situational stressors, and body image.

• Treatment for eating disorders includes providing appropriate guidance for nutritional support and weight gain, the use of antidepressants, and the treatment of complications of the disease such as dehydration and potassium and metabolic derangements.

References

*Avoiding Common Nursing Errors*, Lisa Marcucci, MD, Editor, Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2010.

**Note**: A narrated e-Learning module of this Nugget is available at LearningNurse.com.