

#eatclean #eatfresh #cleaneating #healthyeating #healthyfood
#juicecleanse #rawfood #youcouldhaveorthorexia #eatclean
#eatfresh #cleaneating #healthyeating #healthyfood #juicecleanse
#rawfood #eatclean #eatfresh #cleaneating #healthyeating
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BY LI YULING



Move over, #foodporn! There are new hashtags in town – and they are trending like wildfire. At press time, there were more than 16 million posts with #eatclean and over 12 million with #cleaneating on Instagram alone. Is this a sign of more people being concerned about their health? Perhaps, but experts also think social media could be feeding a lesser known monster: orthorexia nervosa.

Described as an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating, orthorexia nervosa literally means “fixation on righteous eating”. According to the US National Eating Disorders Association, the eating

disorder often starts as an innocent attempt to eat more healthfully, but orthorexics tend to become so fanatical about eating clean, pure and good food that their growing off-limits list leaves them with fewer and fewer choices.

The term orthorexia nervosa was first coined in 1997 by American physician Dr Steven Bratman. Initially, he used it to tease his diet-obsessed patients. But over time, it has assumed “a more significant place as a description for a type of obsession with healthy food that is psychologically or even physically unhealthy,” he writes on his website, www.orthorexia.com. ▶



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EXTREME DIETING So when does healthy eating cross the line? "It becomes unhealthy when it dominates your thoughts all day," says Dr Adrian Wang, consultant psychiatrist at Gleneagles Medical Centre, who adds that orthorexics feel stressed when they're not able to eat the way they want, or the type of food they like.

Another red flag is when the need to eat healthily even affects one's social life. "Many people showing signs of orthorexia do not allow themselves to eat out or socialise with friends as it may mean they have very little control over their intake," says Vanessa McNamara, founder of Singapore-based nutrition consultancy The Travelling Dietitian.

More alarm bells should go off if you find that you no longer enjoy food. For people struggling with the disorder, there is a lot of guilt, stress and anxiety associated with food, adds Vanessa. "Those with orthorexic attitudes tend to focus on either including or excluding specific foods and ingredients from their diet."

More shockingly, orthorexia nervosa can be fatal. Dr Bratman mentions one woman, Kate Finn, who died of heart failure brought on by orthorexia-induced starvation. He cautions: "Emaciation is common among followers of certain health food diets, such as raw foodism, and this can at times reach the extremes seen in anorexia nervosa."

Recently, orthorexia made the headlines again when social media sensation Jordan Younger, better known by her Instagram monikers, The Blonde Vegan (then) and The Balanced Blonde (now), opened up about her struggle with the eating disorder. While Jordan sought help earlier than Kate did, she suffered multiple nutrient deficiencies as well as hormonal imbalances that stopped her period for several months.

FROM VEGAN TO ORTHOREXIC: ONE WOMAN'S STORY

When Jordan started on a vegan diet, she was delighted to find that it didn't upset her usually problematic stomach. In fact, she had never felt healthier, and was so convinced by its health benefits that she decided to spread the word – and pictures of her vegan meals – on social media.

At the peak of its popularity, her Instagram account @theblondevegan had amassed more than 70,000 followers. But she found herself spiralling into extreme behaviour that restricted her diet – and lifestyle – even further.

On her blog www.thebalancedblonde.com, 23-year-old Jordan describes in detail how her obsession developed: "I started fearing a lot of

"I lived in a bubble of restriction based on what I could and could not eat."



Ex-orthorexic Jordan Younger gave up her strict vegan ways to embrace a more balanced diet. Now, she encourages her more than 87,000 Instagram followers to listen to their bodies.

things when it came to food. Having grown up with a sensitive stomach, I already avoided wheat, fried foods, sauces, oil, flour of any type, some legumes and many grains.

"Then I read about raw foods, digestion, food combining, the space at which meals should be eaten apart from each other, and the dangers of even all-natural fructose.

"I started living in a bubble of restriction. Entirely vegan, entirely plant-based, entirely gluten-free, oil-free, refined sugar-free, flour-free, dressing/sauce-free... I lived my life based on when I could and could not eat, and what I could and could not combine.

"When my mum and sister were in town, I don't think I enjoyed a single meal with them. I ate before or after seeing them. I panicked that the food at the restaurants we were going to was going to make me feel like crap and throw off my system.

"I was also addicted to juice cleanses. I felt that if I cleansed my body like I had done successfully so many times in the past, my cravings and hunger pains, and disordered habits would go away."

For Jordan, her wake-up call came in the intimate revelation of a close friend who had also been struggling with an eating disorder. She writes: "I knew I had disordered eating habits, but until I was willing to admit I had developed some variation of an eating disorder, I wasn't going to be able to do anything about it. Then [after my friend's sharing], I started to accept it.

"It's not healthy to feel guilt for listening to my body. I should be thanking myself, not telling myself that I had done wrong – or that I had sinned."

THE SPARK Unlike other eating disorders, orthorexia is harder to diagnose. "There is no clear diagnostic criteria and often, sufferers look normal," says Dr Wang. Indeed, cases

similar to Kate's are rare, and women like Jordan can appear to be in good health.

Among Dr Wang's patients who qualify for a borderline diagnosis, some similarities stand out: They are usually more affluent and better educated, with obsessional personality traits. Jaclyn Reutens, clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants, adds that for those who need to be in total control of themselves, diet restriction is an easy way to do so.

Jordan admits that her personality traits probably made her more susceptible. "Some people who have an extreme all-or-nothing personality like I do are more susceptible to falling into orthorexic tendencies and habits when living on a restrictive type of diet like veganism," she blogs.

FANNING THE FLAMES Healthcare experts like Dr Wang and Jaclyn believe social media and the Internet also play a big part in facilitating – and even promoting – disordered eating behaviours, which is why younger people might be more at risk of developing orthorexia nervosa.

In fact, Jordan agrees that social media can amplify diet trends. "When people see photos of girls with so-called perfect bodies, they feel that if they follow the same diets and workout plans, they will look just like them," Jordan tells us in an exclusive interview.

"I also fell prey to the influences of social media. On one hand, I succumbed to believing I could look and feel like these super healthy raw vegans I was following. On the other, I was also sharing my veganism and posting food and fitness inspiration for others."

Of course, social media is not the sole catalyst. Disordered eating patterns can

also develop after traumatic events like a health scare or losing a loved one to disease. "Seeing a family member suffer from an illness can trigger the desire to prevent that from happening to oneself. Cancer, heart disease or diabetes are some common diseases often mentioned by patients," says Jaclyn.

SEEKING HELP Therapy, such as counselling, is tricky terrain to navigate. "It involves challenging some of the core beliefs of orthorexics, and helping them to understand how their behaviour causes more harm than good," explains Dr Wang.

"You have to tell them to do things in moderation. Unfortunately, dispensing conventional healthy eating advice seldom works because they often think they know better – or that their body types are different from others and need a specific diet."

Perhaps this is where dietitians and nutritional therapists might play a bigger role in helping orthorexics adopt balanced eating patterns. For those who believe they are well-informed of all nutritional pitfalls and what is the best for them, Jaclyn encourages them to question their information sources: "Are they credible? Do they present unbiased facts? Or are they blogs and books written by extreme dieters?"

A change of mindset is also needed. "It's important to remove the labels of good and bad foods," says Vanessa. "I encourage mindful eating and help patients to make sensible decisions about their diet based on evidence-based science rather than what they read on the Internet."

Jordan adds: "Even if you aren't following a strict diet, but feel as if your obsession with healthy, clean and pure foods, plus your fear of off-limit foods, is starting to affect your life negatively, it's time to take a look at what you are doing and think about making some changes or getting help. Be as open as possible about your struggles."

*If this story resonates with you, or reminds you of someone you know, we hope you will take the first step forward by reaching out to a healthcare professional. It helps to discuss your concerns – and especially health issues like missed periods – with someone else. **S***