Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Sex Differences in Adolescent Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa: Beyond the Signs and Symptoms

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We review research related to sex differences in eating disorders (EDs) in adolescents. Prior work has explored clinical differences; thus, we examine literature in areas identified as playing an etiological or maintenance role in EDs including: genetics, hormones, neurocognitive inefficiencies, and reward circuitry. Sex steroids appear to a play role in the unmasking of genetic risk for development of EDs and puberty may be a heightened period of risk for females. While neurocognitive differences have been well studied in adults with ED, research with adolescents has been less conclusive. Recent work suggests that neural circuitry involved in reward and punishment may play role in development and maintenance of EDs in females. Males are underrepresented in these areas of research. Given known sex differences in healthy adolescents, it is likely there are sex differences in the putative biological etiology/maintenance of EDs. Males should be included in future research.

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