



# Orthorexia Nervosa

Compiled by Karin Kratina, PhD, RD, LD/N

Those who are obsessed with healthy eating may be suffering from “orthorexia nervosa,” a term which means literally “fixation on righteous eating.” Orthorexia starts out as an innocent attempt to eat more healthfully, but the orthorexic becomes fixated on food quality and purity. They become more and more consumed with what and how much to eat, and how to deal with ‘slip-ups.’ An iron-clad will is needed to maintain this rigid eating style. Every day is a day to eat right, be ‘good,’ rise above others in dietary prowess, and self-punish if temptation wins (usually stricter eating, fasts and exercise). Self-esteem becomes wrapped up in the purity of their diet and they often feel superior to others, especially in regards to food intake.

Eventually food choices become so restrictive, with both variety and calories, that health suffers – an ironic twist for a person so completely dedicated to healthy eating. Eventually, the obsession with healthy eating can crowd out other activities and interests, impair relationships, and become physically dangerous.

## Is Orthorexia An Eating Disorder?

Orthorexia is a term coined by Steven Bratman, MD, to describe his own experience with food and eating. It is not an officially recognized disorder, but is similar to other eating disorders – those with anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa obsess about calories and weight while orthorexics obsess about healthy eating (not about being ‘thin’ and losing weight).

## Why Does Someone Get Orthorexia?

Orthorexia appears to be motivated by health, but there are underlying motivations, which can include safety from poor health, compulsion for complete control, escape from fears, wanting to be thin, improving self-esteem, searching for spirituality through food, and using food to create an identity.

## Do I Have Orthorexia?

Consider the following questions. The more ‘yes’ responses, the more likely you are dealing with orthorexia.

- Do you wish that occasionally you could just eat and not worry about food quality?
- Do you ever wish you could spend less time on food and more time on living and loving?
- Does it sound beyond your ability to eat a meal prepared with love by someone else – one single meal – and not try to control what is served?
- Are you constantly looking for the ways foods are unhealthy for you?
- Do love, joy, play and creativity take a backseat to having the perfect diet?
- Do you feel guilt or self-loathing when you stray from your diet?
- Do you feel in control when you eat the correct diet?
- Have you positioned yourself on a nutritional pedestal and wonder how others can possibly eat the food they eat?



## So What's The Big Deal?

The diet of the orthorexic can actually be unhealthy, with the nutritional problems dependent on the specific diet the person has imposed upon him or herself. Social problems are more obvious. An orthorexic may be socially isolated, often because they plan their life around food. They may have little room in life for anything other than thinking about and planning food intake. Orthorexics lose the ability to eat intuitively – to know when they are hungry, how much they need, and when they are full. The orthorexic never learns how to eat naturally and is destined to keep “falling off the wagon” and thus feeling shameful, similar to any other diet mentality.

## When Orthorexia Becomes All Consuming

Dr. Bratman, who went through orthorexia, states “I pursued wellness through healthy eating for years, but gradually I began to sense that something was going wrong. The poetry of my life was disappearing. My ability to carry on normal conversations was hindered by intrusive thoughts of food. The need to obtain meals free of meat, fat, and artificial chemicals had put nearly all social forms of eating beyond my reach. I was lonely and obsessed. ... I found it terribly difficult to free myself. I had been seduced by righteous eating. The problem of my life's meaning had been transferred inexorably to food, and I could not reclaim it.” (Source: [www.orthorexia.com](http://www.orthorexia.com))

## Are You Telling Me It's Unhealthy to Follow A Healthy Diet?

Following a healthy diet does not mean you are orthorexic, and nothing is wrong with eating healthfully. Unless, however, 1) it is taking up an inordinate amount of time and attention in your life; 2) deviating from that diet is met with guilt and self-loathing; and/or 3) it is used to avoid life issues.

## What Is The Treatment for Orthorexia?

Society pushes healthy eating and thinness, so it is easy for many to not realize how problematic this behavior can become. Even more difficult is that the person doing the healthy eating can hide behind the thought that they are simply eating well (and that others do not). Further complicating treatment is the fact that motivation behind orthorexia is multi-faceted. First, the orthorexic must admit there is a problem, then identify what caused the obsession. They must also become more flexible and less dogmatic with their eating. There will be deeper emotional issues, and working through them will make the transition to normal eating easier.

While orthorexia is not a condition your doctor will diagnose, recovery can require professional help. A practitioner skilled at treating those with eating disorders is the best choice. This handout can be used to help the professional understand more about orthorexia.

## Recovery

The recovered orthorexic will still eat healthfully, but there will be a different understanding of what healthy eating is. They will realize that food will not make them a better person and that basing their self-esteem on the quality of their diet is irrational. Their identity will shift from “the person who eats health food” to a broader definition of who they are – a person who loves, who works, who is fun. They will find that while food is important, it is one small aspect of life and, often, there are things that are more important!

### Reference:

*The Orthorexia Home Page.* (2003). Retrieved February 8, 2006, from <http://www.orthorexia.com>.



© 2006 National Eating Disorders Association. Permission is granted to copy and reprint materials for educational purposes only. National Eating Disorders Association must be cited and web address listed.  
[www.NationalEatingDisorders.org](http://www.NationalEatingDisorders.org) Information and Referral Helpline: 800.931.2237