

Researchers seek clues in food disorders

By Craig Picheura
Staff writer

People obsessed with food are being sought for a study by a Farmington Hills psychiatric clinic using lithium medication and counseling to treat two eating disorders.

The obsession may be either in the form of a chronic loss of appetite — known as anorexia nervosa, in which persons starve themselves to become thinner — or bulimia, a disorder in which persons indulge in uncontrollable eating binges followed by vomiting.

Twenty to 40 volunteers are being sought by the staff of Orchard Hills Psychiatric Center through classified ads being run in this newspaper and others.

The volunteers will be given low doses of lithium carbonate, a neurological medicine primarily used in treating depression or manic-depressive behavior.

The research project will begin in January.

Research psychologist at the clinic, Dr. Steven Doehrmann, Ph.D., said Thursday both anorexia and bulimia victims suffer from the common symptom of depression. Recent studies on treatment of both psychological disorders, he said, indicate some success with prescribing low doses of lithium to treat the problem.

To monitor the effectiveness of the medication, Doehrmann said, participants in the study and the direct therapist won't know which subjects are receiving lithium and which are taking a placebo (a substitute pill containing no medication).



"It's called a double-blind control group," Doehrmann said. "The drug group and the control group (taking placebo) will switch in the middle of the program and even the direct therapist doesn't know which subjects are taking lithium and which are taking the placebo."

PATIENTS won't be informed, Doehrmann said, because it's felt that if someone knows they're not taking medication they might be more apt to fall back into obsessive behavior patterns.

The dosage of lithium will be below the normal dose prescribed in treatment of depression, Doehrmann said, because patients might feel a slight drowsiness at a higher level and therefore by know that they are receiving medication.

The dosage provided in the study will be about 300 milligrams, the psychologist said.

Medical director of the research

project is Dr. K.E. Pitts, M.D. and others involved in the program are Dr. Charles O'Shaughnessy, M.D. and Maria Beye, a doctoral student from West Berlin who is a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan.

To alert victims of the disorder of the program, Peggy Debelak, staff member of the clinic, has been visiting area high schools to inform educators and students of the clinic's upcoming study and on-going counseling.

Incidents of anorexia and bulimia are growing rapidly, particularly in middle-to-upper-class American society, according to psychologists. High school and college-aged women are more apt to exhibit the behavior. Of the two disorders, anorexia is probably best known but bulimia is much more prevalent.

National studies have roughly pegged the population of high school and college students who are anorexic at almost 2 percent of the total. More than 15 percent of young persons in that age group have some tendency toward bulimia.

WHILE SOCIETAL factors — such as the current emphasis on weight control and fitness — have an impact on the rise of the two disorders, doctors say individual factors are more important.

"These (anorexic) girls are usually perfectionists, not malingers," Doehrmann said. "They get good grades, they're neat, clean, tidy, on time, not tardy. They use make-up. Everything is perfect about them — they're very con-

cerned about their appearance. But they don't think they're effective. They don't think they do anything right."

"They feel the only thing they can control is what we do three times a day — eat. They are absolutely obsessed with thinness. If you ask an anorexic how many calories in an apple, they know. They can tell you what they had to eat at every meal in the last three, four days."

To be labeled anorexic a person must be at least 20 percent under the normal weight for their height and age.

Physical complications such as malnutrition accompany the disorder.

Anorexic girls who've passed puberty often stop menstruating due to lack of nourishment and strive to become less sexual. Eating habits of anorexic persons are often very peculiar.

Persons who feel they suffer from either affliction but can't afford counseling have an alternative. A free self-help group for anorexia and bulimia victims meets 10:30 a.m. every Saturday at the clinic at Suite 201, 23800 Orchard Lake Road.

Anyone interested in volunteering for the medication research program can contact the clinic at that address or by calling 474-1144.

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