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EATING DISORDERS IN ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract: Eating disorders are serious psychiatric conditions that affect millions of adolescents worldwide, and are often associated with dysfunctional eating patterns, excessive concern with weight and body image. In view of this, the aim of this study is to develop a study on eating disorders in adolescence, and how they can influence the quality of life of these individuals. The methodology used in the study was a literature review, based on books and scientific articles from various areas on the subject. The results show that eating disorders in adolescence represent a significant challenge for public health, since they affect not only physical health, but also the emotional and social well-being of young people. In conclusion, the influence of the media, unrealistic aesthetic standards and social pressure contribute to the distortion of body image, increasing adolescents' vulnerability to these disorders. It is therefore essential to implement educational strategies in schools and society to promote a healthy relationship with food and self-image, as well as family support and professional monitoring.

Keywords: Eating disorders. Adolescence. Healthy eating.

INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders are serious psychiatric conditions that affect millions of adolescents worldwide, and are often associated with dysfunctional eating patterns, excessive concern with weight and body image, and can have serious consequences for physical and mental health (Lima *et al.*, 2024). Among the most common eating disorders in adolescence are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder (Melo, 2022).

Eating disorders have a multifactorial etiology, involving biological, psychological and sociocultural factors, such as biological factors, in which studies suggest that there is a genetic predisposition to eating disorders, in-

fluenced by neurotransmitters such as serotonin, which regulates mood and appetite (Lima *et al.*, 2024).

Psychological factors such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and perfectionism are common characteristics in adolescents with eating disorders, and sociocultural factors also play a part, since the influence of the media and social networks in constructing unrealistic standards of beauty can lead adolescents to seek a body considered ideal, even if this compromises their health (Melo, 2022).

There are various types of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, which is characterized by extreme food restriction, intense fear of gaining weight and distortion of body image, and can lead to severe malnutrition, osteoporosis, heart problems and even death (Araújo *et al.*, 2022).

Bulimia nervosa, which involves episodes of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors such as induced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives or extreme physical exercise. It can cause gastrointestinal problems, electrolyte imbalances and tooth damage due to the acidity of the vomit (Almeida *et al.*, 2022).

In this context, these disorders can cause profound physical, emotional and social impacts, such as nutritional deficiencies, impaired growth and development, hormonal changes and cardiovascular risks, as well as depression, anxiety, social isolation and an increased risk of suicide and even difficulties in maintaining interpersonal relationships, a drop in academic performance and social isolation (Lima *et al.*, 2024).

The treatment of these pathologies requires a multidisciplinary approach, involving mental health professionals, nutritionists and doctors. One example would be Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which is one of the most effective approaches to help adolescents change dysfunctional thinking and behavior patterns. In these cases, the support

of a nutritionist is essential for dietary re-education and regaining a healthy weight, and in severe cases, hospitalization may be necessary for monitoring and clinical support (Cardoso *et al.*, 2023).

In view of this, the work has the following problem: how does eating disorders influence the quality of life of adolescents?

This research is therefore justified by the relevance of the topic, given that eating disorders in adolescence are complex conditions that require specialized attention and care. Awareness of the warning signs, the promotion of a healthy relationship with food and adequate support can make a difference in the prevention and treatment of these conditions. It is essential that parents, educators and health professionals are aware of this growing problem and look for effective ways to intervene.

Therefore, the aim of this work is to develop a study on eating disorders in adolescence, and how they can influence the quality of life of these individuals.

METHODOLOGY

The work was a literature review, which according to Gil (2017) can be carried out as part of different types of academic studies, such as course completion papers, dissertations, theses, scientific articles and research projects. It is essential to contextualize the research, provide a theoretical basis for arguments and provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge on the topic in question.

In order to ensure the relevance and quality of the information collected, the following inclusion criteria were established: studies published in the last 5 years to ensure that scientific knowledge was up to date; articles available in full in Portuguese, English or Spanish; studies that deal exclusively with eating disorders in adolescence and research published in indexed, peer-reviewed journals.

Studies were excluded from the review: Do not specifically address the adolescent age group; literature reviews without a defined methodology, research that presents incomplete data or inconsistent methodologies and studies that do not have access to the full text.

The search was carried out in the following databases: *PubMed*; *Scielo* (*Scientific Electronic Library Online*) and *Lilacs* (Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature). The descriptors used in the search were selected based on the Health Sciences Descriptors (*DeCS*) and *Medical Subject Headings* (*MeSH*), combined with Boolean operators.

The Boolean operators AND and OR were used to optimize the searches. The AND operator was used to combine terms and refine the results, ensuring that the studies addressed multiple aspects simultaneously. For example: (“*eating disorders*” OR “*eating disorders*”) AND *adolescence*; (“*anorexia nervosa*” OR “*bulimia nervosa*” OR “*binge eating disorder*”) AND *adolescents*; (“*body image*” AND “*adolescence*” AND “*eating disorders*”) and (“*mental health*” AND “*eating disorders*” AND “*young people*”).

The articles were selected in three stages: reading the titles, i.e. excluding irrelevant or duplicate studies; reading the abstracts referring to the Preliminary Analysis to check suitability for the inclusion criteria and full reading, i.e. detailed evaluation of the texts for inclusion in the review.

Therefore, the discussion was structured based on the defined objectives, relating the findings of the literature to current practices and proposing avenues for future research, totaling 14 articles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Adolescence serves as a transitional stage from childhood to adulthood, characterized by significant physical, emotional and social transformations. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), this period spans from 10 to 19 years, while Brazil's Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) defines it as occurring between 12 and 18 years, such changes are essential, including growth spurts and changes in behavior, play a crucial role in human development (Souza; Andrade; Villalba, 2019).

Bezerra *et al.* (2024) emphasize that adolescence represents a complex and dynamic growth phase, as during this period individuals experience physical, cognitive and emotional changes that manifest themselves unevenly, shaped by cultural and social influences. The formation of an independent identity represents a significant challenge during this period, leading to diverse outcomes.

Alvarenga; Dunker; Phillippi (2020) explain that eating disorders are complex conditions that affect both the body and the mind, significantly impacting the way people eat and interact with food, with common examples among adolescents including anorexia, bulimia and binge eating.

In the study by Bezerra *et al.* (2024), they identified that individuals diagnosed with anorexia nervosa are underweight, avoid high-calorie foods and resort to attitudes such as vomiting and the use of laxatives to lose weight, whose disorder stands out for its intense fear of gaining weight and distortion of body image.

According to Manochio *et al.* (2020), the search for thinness results in psychological and physical pain. As an example, he cites bulimia nervosa, which is a condition that causes profound emotional damage. The individual with bulimia faces an intense conflict between the desire to eat and the fear of gaining wei-

ght, whose feelings of remorse and guilt after episodes of high food intake result in compensatory behaviors that are harmful to health (Manochio *et al.*, 2020).

On the other hand, binge eating disorder is marked by recurrent episodes of excessive food consumption, accompanied by feelings of loss of control, guilt and embarrassment. In these episodes, the individual consumes large amounts of food in a short period of time, usually two hours, feeling unable to stop, and biological, psychological and social factors influence binge eating (Bittar; Soares *et al.*, 2020).

The findings of Bittar and Soares (2020) revealed that disordered eating encompasses various eating practices that are considered harmful or dysfunctional, and can develop into an eating disorder. Examples include restrictive diets, prolonged fasting, insufficient food intake and replacing meals with shakes, supplements or drugs that act as appetite suppressants, with the aim of reducing weight, usually without the guidance of a nutritionist.

Silva *et al.* (2020) investigated that social networks have the capacity to transform the way we communicate and relate, creating a virtual environment conducive to the expression of ideas, feelings and experiences. Freedom of expression and the elimination of geographical barriers have made these platforms a space for personal narratives, allowing individuals to share their stories with a wide audience (Silva *et al.*, 2020).

Within this scenario, the media plays a significant role in influencing people, conditioning them to reflect on how they should behave and act, in which profiles that exalt thinness and the idea of an idealized body on social networks can generate frustration, especially among women and adolescents, thus contributing to the increase in disorders related to self-image (Silva *et al.*, 2020).

Also according to Bittar and Soares (2020), they concluded that over time social networks tend to foster a diet culture, marked by dietary restrictions and different aspects of nutritional inadequacy, which can result in disordered eating behaviors, especially in more vulnerable individuals

In a study carried out by Alves *et al.* (2024), they observed that during meals, people seek to meet their physiological, psychological and pleasure needs, so this behavior should not be interpreted only from the individual in isolation; it is essential to consider their interactions with the environment in which they live.

Considering that, in a community, everyone is impacted by the social aspects of their time and, even if in a contrary way, by the social impositions in force, during adolescence this interaction between society and the individual becomes even more acute (Bittar; Soares, 2020).

Thus, it can be seen that young people, often influenced by a society shaped by media standards, tend to idealize perfect bodies and shapes that are biologically unattainable. As a result, they form a distorted self-image, generating dissatisfaction with their own appearance and contributing to the emergence of issues that can evolve into eating disorders (Aquino *et al.*, 2021).

For Cardoso *et al.* (2024) it is easy to understand the relationship between eating disorders in adolescents and social media, since the more time an individual spends in contact with networks, the greater the tendency to compare themselves to what they see, leading them to believe that those images represent ideal lives and bodies.

In view of this, the desire to achieve this ideal can be influenced by the fragility and lack of precise judgment of young people who, on leaving the virtual environment, begin a journey to integrate into a specific social group; often without considering the possible consequences.

Eating disorders are dealt with in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). According to (DSM-IV, 2014), these disorders are related to changes in eating patterns: They are defined by a persistent change in eating or eating-related behaviors that results in inappropriate food intake or absorption and that significantly impairs physical health or psychosocial functioning, with diagnostic criteria described for [...] anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder (DSM-IV, 2014, p.329).

Although both genders can be affected by eating disorders, there is a higher incidence among women, according to a report by Cardoso *et al.* (2024) the presence of a family history is seen as a possible contributing factor to the emergence of chronic diseases. Thus, when poor diet and lack of physical activity are linked, it is common to find adolescents suffering from obesity, overweight or malnutrition, which ends up facilitating the development of an eating disorder (Cardoso *et al.*, 2024).

In cases involving females, there is also social pressure to conform to defined beauty standards, and even within their own families, girls often face greater demands than guidance regarding their bodies, eating habits and behaviors (Gomes *et al.*, 2021).

Regarding the evolution of eating disorders, Zilse *et al.* (2024) point out that, with regard to behavioral symptoms, compensatory actions for weight control usually begin with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder, which occurs simultaneously with the appreciation of body weight and the feeling of fat accumulation.

This excessive obsession with the body, its measurements and the attempt to conform to a standard imposed by the media is the main cause of the disorders mentioned (Gomes *et al.*, 2021).

It is important to emphasize that early identification of eating disorders or awareness of the emergence of these problems at this stage of life is fundamental to facilitate rapid intervention, preventing progression to adulthood and reducing cases of malnutrition and fatalities (Gomes *et al.*, 2021).

Santos and Silva (2024) mention that among the most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating. Anorexia nervosa usually begins in adolescence and is often triggered by stressful events in the young person's life; there is an excessive preoccupation with body image, which leads to the adoption of restrictive diets that seem harmless.

For a diagnosis to be made, eating habits are taken into account that present a severe calorie limitation in relation to basic nutritional needs, resulting in significant weight loss, falling below what is considered normal; in addition to an intense fear of putting on weight or increasing body fat, and a strong distortion in the perception of one's own body (DSM V, 2014).

Bulimia nervosa occurs when the person shows frequent episodes of binge eating, consuming large quantities of food in a short period of time, i.e. there is a loss of control over vomiting episodes, as well as the inappropriate use of laxatives and diuretics, accompanied by excessive physical activity. There is a mismatch in the individual's daily diet, varying according to the intensity of their compulsion at the time (Moraes *et al.*, 2021).

Binge eating is defined by the absence of control when eating; when, even when physically satiated, the person persists in eating, ingesting a large amount of food for a prolonged period. Unlike bulimia nervosa, which also includes binge eating symptoms, this disorder does not exhibit inappropriate compensatory behaviors (Santos; Silva, 2024).

Another aspect is the frequency with which the individual manifests binge eating. Periodic binge eating is identified when such episodes occur at least twice a week for a period of three months (Rezende; Pereira, 2020).

In this context, the management of eating disorders is carried out through non-pharmacological strategies, such as environmental changes, individual and family psychotherapeutic intervention, since, in several situations, cognitive-behavioral therapy can be used to treat food phobia.

Thus, the demand for a multidisciplinary team becomes clear, where a joint and individually planned strategy is established. This team includes professionals such as nutritionists, psychologists, psychiatrists, endocrinologists, physiotherapists and physical educators (Gomes *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the combination of these applied fields of study, combined with raising awareness among young people and their families, can provide effective treatment.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the work, it was observed that eating disorders in adolescence represent a significant public health challenge, since they affect not only the physical health, but also the emotional and social well-being of young people. Disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder are influenced by biological, psychological and sociocultural factors, making a multidisciplinary approach essential for prevention and treatment.

The influence of the media, unrealistic aesthetic standards and social pressure contribute to the distortion of body image, increasing adolescents' vulnerability to these disorders. It is therefore essential to implement educational strategies in schools and society to promote a healthy relationship with food and self-image, as well as family support and professional

follow-up, involving nutritionists, psychologists and doctors, which are indispensable for the recovery of affected individuals.

It is therefore essential that new studies deepen our understanding of eating disorders in adolescence, taking into account not only the factors that are already known, but also new influences that arise with the evolution of society, such as the impact of social networks and the advance of digital technologies.

Therefore, combating eating disorders in adolescence requires awareness, information and adequate support, since investing in public mental health policies, encouraging open dialogue on the subject and demystifying unattainable standards of beauty are fundamental steps towards minimizing the impact of these disorders and guaranteeing healthy development for adolescents.

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