



a mental health issue," he says. "I know people say jockeys only flip because of the job but, believe me, when you've started flipping it's very hard to stop. Your body ends up not being able to hold on to food. You get into a state of mind where your brain is telling you that you have to get rid of the food you've eaten."

"It's a huge issue. I flipped for 15 years and know what it's like. In the racing industry at the moment it's a bigger addiction than even drink or drugs. When the younger generation see senior jockeys doing it they follow suit. It is still big out there and it happens in weighing rooms."

Offering encouragement for the future, O'Connor adds: "The Turf Club's senior medical officer Adrian McGoldrick has done a very good job trying to clean up the flipping over the last couple of the years. I'm hoping it's starting to go out the window. I have all my apprentices seeing dieticians, which is so important. If we can get the kids on proper diets when they're young it will cut out the flipping."

PJA concern: 'A sudden and increasing prevalence of flipping'

The BHA and PJA do not equate flipping with bulimia. Both, however, are keen to reduce the number of riders who see food as their nemesis.

"Historically, as the regulator, we perhaps didn't acknowledge the existence of flipping as much as we should have done," says the BHA's Dr Jerry Hill.

"Flipping and bulimia are two separate things that get bracketed together because the mechanism, self-induced vomiting, is the same," he adds, while conceding: "Warren O'Connor will see it from one angle. I'll see it from another. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle."

"For the vast majority of jockeys it's a tool to control their weight – and it's a very poor choice. It reduces athletic performance, reaction time and strength. There is also good evidence it has an effect on mood."

PJA chief executive Paul Struthers says: "The PJA nutrition team continues to do an excellent job off a very limited budget, and we're delighted Jerry Hill is so supportive in this area and undertaking good work with the team at LJMU. Everyone recognises much more needs to be done, and is being done, through our team, the Jockey Training and Development Strategy and the work of Jerry and LJMU."

"That's particularly important with the sudden and increasing prevalence of flipping, almost exclusively among young Flat jockeys in the south, which is a worrying development."

"They are risking serious long-term physical and mental health problems. We need to find a way to make them realise there are safer, healthier routes that will improve their weight and performance before the risks become a reality."

More could be done to tackle worrying problem

The desire to help jockeys nutritionally and to dissuade them from flipping must be welcomed. There are, however, other things that could be done, such as a further raising of the weights allocated to horses on the Flat.

Like people in general, jockeys are getting taller, bigger and therefore heavier. To win the ongoing battle with the scales they have always flipped and it is possible some, if the rules allow it, always will.

We should, though, be concerned if those beginning their careers are quickly becoming converts to a practice medical experts insist has significant health risks.

The vast majority of people outside the sport would be shocked and disturbed at what some talented young adults feel they must do in order to race-ride. Those inside the sport and its followers should be equally troubled.

what the nutritionists advise works for you, that's great. If it doesn't, you either have to give up or try something else.

"There are jockeys who are branded as flippers. Others do it without anyone noticing. It's been very common with the elite jockeys, but nobody has ever taken notice of it. Now a few people are pointing it out and it's a big problem."

"With younger jockeys taller than was once the case it has become more popular. The average Flat jockey would now be 5ft 5in or 5ft 6in. Naturally, very few of them can walk around at 8st 7lb or 8st 8lb. Flipping is the lazy option for some jockeys. For others it's the only way they can ride at certain weights."

"I think a lot of the older jockeys have grown out of doing it and don't use it to control their weight anymore. I could think of four off the top of my head who would say

privately they used to do it but now don't. Some older jockeys who don't struggle with their weight may see a problem with it, but you only have to remind them of some of the great jockeys who had well-known weight troubles and they shut their mouths."

The rider adds: "You have to ask, is it bulimia? Personally, I don't think it is. An alcoholic has to drink every day. Someone with bulimia has to regurgitate what they've eaten every day. That's not the same as flipping. For me it's an occasional thing. You really need to understand the mechanics of someone's stomach and I'm not a doctor. If I ever saw blood it would be a different story."

The jockey also highlights the crucial copycat nature to flipping.

"It's a tough subject," he says. "It's difficult to tell an apprentice not to flip when he sees his idol is controlling his weight that way and having massive success."

The jockey coach: 'There is bulimia among jockeys'

Warren O'Connor was one of Ireland's leading Flat jockeys, winning four Group 1 races in 1991 and 1992 on Kooyonga. He also became addicted to alcohol and cocaine. On top of all that, he flipped.

O'Connor has subsequently turned his life around, regaining his health and becoming Ireland's first jockey coach. He echoes a view expressed last year by 6ft Flat jockey George Baker, who maintains his weight using good diet, long runs and hot baths.

Interviewed for The Times last year by the late Alan Lee, Baker said: "I've never done it. It doesn't appeal to me. I can't believe it's good for your health and I would rather pack up than go down that route. From what I've seen, once you start doing it you can't stop."

O'Connor agrees, but believes flipping is too gentle a term for what takes place. "There is bulimia among jockeys and it's