

Eating Disorders

Factsheet



What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a serious mental illness that involves a person developing thoughts, feelings and eating behaviour which can take over their life and make them very unwell.

Eating disorders can involve eating too much or too little and becoming really unhappy, worried and preoccupied with things such as weight and shape.

It's important to remember that lots of people worry about what they look like and from time to time and might be unhappy with their weight or shape, but for someone with an eating disorder these thoughts and feelings can have a serious impact on their life. It can impact on physical health, education, and general daily living, such as spending time with friends, spending time with family, going out and taking part in activities.

Causes

There is no one cause of an eating disorder; however, they are sometimes associated with coping with feelings of sadness, worry and stress. Sometimes life stressors such as exams, bullying, friendship or family relationship difficulties and bereavement or loss may play a part in how someone copes or feels about themselves.

Often, personal factors such as having low self-esteem, experiencing anxiety or depression, setting high standards and being perfectionistic and identifying as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transsexual) are sometimes associated with people who develop eating disorders. However, experiencing any one of these things does not necessarily mean that someone will develop an eating disorder or difficulty.

There are a number of eating disorders, but the most well-known are Anorexia and Bulimia. Here is an overview of these two disorders.

Anorexia

Anorexia (or anorexia nervosa) is a serious mental illness where people are of low weight due to limiting how much they eat and drink. They may develop "rules" around what they feel they can and cannot eat, as well as things like when and where they'll eat. Anorexia can affect anyone of any age, gender, ethnicity, or background.

As well as limiting how much they eat, they may do lots of exercise, make themselves sick, or misuse laxatives to get rid of food eaten. Some people with anorexia may experience cycles of bingeing (eating large amounts of food at once) and then purging.

Types and indicators

There are many different types of eating disorders and all of them are serious.

All eating disorders are treatable, and a full recovery is possible.

Here are some signs that might indicate eating disorders:

- Constant thinking or worrying about food, calories, weight gain or your shape. You might notice that the person finds it difficult to concentrate on other things
- Reducing food in order to lose weight and setting strict rules about what the person can or cannot eat



- Hiding food
- Trying to do other things to lose weight, such as lots of exercise, vomiting taking laxatives or slimming pills
- The person may become tired and more emotional (tearful, irritable)
- A female's periods might stop
- Weight loss/gain
- Other signs of physical illness such as low or high blood sugar

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Bulimia

Bulimia (or bulimia nervosa) is a serious mental illness. It can affect anyone of any age, gender, ethnicity, or background. People with bulimia are caught in a cycle of eating large quantities of food (called bingeing), and then trying to compensate for that overeating by vomiting, taking laxatives or diuretics, fasting, or exercising excessively (called purging). Treatment at the earliest possible opportunity gives the best chance for a fast and sustained recovery from bulimia.

Other disorders

For other disorders you can find information at BEAT ... <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/about-eating-disorders/types/>

What you can do to support

- Stay calm
- Find time; don't rush the conversation
- Be prepared for a young person to deny or minimise a difficulty
- Be prepared to listen, acknowledge, and validate a young person's emotions and thoughts
- Let the young person know you want to understand, help and support
- Ask how you can help
- Recognise that this could be the person's coping mechanism at this time
- Don't force anyone to eat or try to stop behaviours associated with the disorder unless you are a trained professional or have been given guidance such as a care and support plan

Getting help for someone

- It can be difficult to know what to do if you're worried that someone has an eating disorder
- They may not realise they have an eating disorder. They may also deny it, or be secretive and defensive about their eating or weight
- Let them know you're worried about them and encourage them to see a GP. You could offer to go along with them

- Not wanting to eat meals with the family
- Making excuses for why they're not eating
- Asking for healthy foods or wanting to follow various diets (i.e., vegetarian/vegan/ gluten free/ raw food/ low carbohydrate)
- Eating unusual food combinations (and this is a new behaviour)

Types and indicators cont'd

- Having rituals around eating/ preparing food
- Checking food labels or packaging
- Becoming distressed if others prepare food
- Being more active
- Appearing more withdrawn
- Emotionally labile, irritable tearful of generally behaving 'out of character'
- Wearing baggy clothes
- Appearing pre-occupied or unable to concentrate
- Deterioration in academic performance - Either becomes preoccupied by checking themselves in the mirror and weighing or avoids mirrors altogether
- Complains of feeling the cold