



# Eating Disorders

## WHAT IS AN EATING DISORDER?

There is a commonly held view that eating disorders are a lifestyle choice. Eating disorders are serious and often fatal illnesses that cause severe disturbances to a person's eating behaviors. Obsessions with food, body weight, and shape may also signal an eating disorder. Common eating disorders include (1) anorexia nervosa, (2) bulimia nervosa, and (3) binge-eating disorder.

### 1. ANOREXIA NERVOSA

Suffering from abnormally low body weight, intense fear of gaining weight, and a distorted perception of weight or shape. People with anorexia nervosa may see themselves as overweight, even when they are dangerously underweight. People with anorexia nervosa typically weigh themselves repeatedly, severely restrict the amount of food they eat, and eat very small quantities of only certain foods. Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental disorder. While many young women and men with this disorder die from complications associated with starvation, others die of suicide. In women, suicide is much more common in those with anorexia than with most other mental disorders.

Symptoms include:

- Extremely restricted eating
- Extreme thinness (emaciation)
- A relentless pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy weight
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- Distorted body image, a self-esteem that is heavily influenced by perceptions of body weight

Other symptoms may develop over time, including:

- Thinning of the bones (osteopenia or osteoporosis)
- Mild anemia and muscle wasting and weakness
- Brittle hair and nails
- Dry and yellowish skin
- Growth of fine hair all over the body (lanugo)
- Severe constipation
- Low blood pressure, slowed breathing and pulse
- Damage to the structure and function of the heart
- Brain damage
- Multiorgan failure
- Drop in internal body temperature, causing a person to feel cold all the time
- Lethargy, sluggishness, or feeling tired all the time
- Infertility



## **2. BULIMIA NERVOSA**

Experiencing episodes of bingeing and purging that involve feeling a lack of control over your eating. Many people with bulimia also restrict their eating during the day, which often leads to more binge eating and purging. People with bulimia nervosa have recurrent and frequent episodes of eating unusually large amounts of food and feeling a lack of control over these episodes. This binge-eating is followed by behavior that compensates for the overeating such as forced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives or diuretics, fasting, excessive exercise, or a combination of these behaviors. Unlike anorexia nervosa, people with bulimia nervosa usually maintain what is considered a healthy or relatively normal weight.

Symptoms include:

- Chronically inflamed and sore throat
- Swollen salivary glands in the neck and jaw area
- Worn tooth enamel and increasingly sensitive and decaying teeth as a result of exposure to stomach acid
- Acid reflux disorder and other gastrointestinal problems
- Intestinal distress and irritation from laxative abuse
- Severe dehydration from purging of fluids
- Electrolyte imbalance (too low or too high levels of sodium, calcium, potassium and other minerals) which can lead to stroke or heart attack

## **3. BINGE-EATING DISORDER**

Regularly eating too much food (binge) and feeling a lack of control over your eating. This behavior is often followed by feelings of disgust, shame, and guilt. People with binge-eating disorder lose control over his or her eating. Unlike bulimia nervosa, periods of binge-eating are not followed by purging, excessive exercise, or fasting. As a result, people with binge-eating disorder often are overweight or obese. Binge-eating disorder is the most common eating disorder in the U.S.

Symptoms include:

- Eating unusually large amounts of food in a specific amount of time
- Eating even when you're full or not hungry
- Eating fast during binge episodes
- Eating until you're uncomfortably full
- Eating alone or in secret to avoid embarrassment
- Feeling distressed, ashamed, or guilty about your eating
- Frequently dieting, possibly without weight loss



## **WARNING SIGNS OF AN EATING DISORDER**

### Food Behaviors

- Extremely restricted eating, you only eat small quantities of only certain foods;
- Eating unusually large amounts of food, followed by behavior that compensates for the over-eating such as forced vomiting, fasting, or a combination;
- Abuse of laxatives and diuretics (water pills);
- Heightened anxiety around meal times, avoidance of all social situations involving food

### Appearance and Body Image

- Extreme thinness (emaciation), or weighing yourself repeatedly;
- Intense fear of gaining weight;
- Distorted body image, a self-esteem that is heavily influenced by perceptions of body weight and shape, or a denial of the seriousness of low body weight;
- Feeling shame and guilt about your eating habits;
- Excessive exercise.

## **RISK FACTORS**

Eating disorders frequently appear during the teen years or young adulthood but may also develop during childhood or later in life. These disorders affect both genders, although rates among women are higher than among men. Like women who have eating disorders, men also have a distorted sense of body image. For example, men may have muscle dysmorphia, a type of disorder marked by an extreme concern with becoming more muscular.

Researchers are finding that eating disorders are caused by a complex interaction of genetic, biological, behavioral, psychological, and social factors. Researchers are using the latest technology and science to better understand eating disorders.

One approach involves the study of human genes. Eating disorders run in families. Researchers are working to identify DNA variations that are linked to the increased risk of developing eating disorders.

Brain imaging studies are also providing a better understanding of eating disorders. For example, researchers have found differences in patterns of brain activity in women with eating disorders in comparison with healthy women. This kind of research can help guide the development of new means of diagnosis and treatment of eating disorders.



## **WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU MAY HAVE AN EATING DISORDER**

- See a Doctor or Nutritionist: they can show you how to introduce vital nutrients back into your diet. They can also help you find ways to fuel your body in a healthy way.
- Seek Therapy Options: this can be an important part of recovery – find out what is covered on your health insurance plan, or look at mental health programs that offer therapy services at little or no charge.
- Join a Support Group: talking to survivors of eating disorders in a group setting can be helpful, or join an online group where there are many recovery-specific blogs to help provide some support.
- Reach out to family and friends: starting an honest dialogue with your loved ones will be beneficial to everyone involved and will help you feel less alone.

## **TREATMENTS AND THERAPIES**

Adequate nutrition, reducing excessive exercise, and stopping purging behaviors are the foundations of treatment. Treatment plans are tailored to individual needs and may include one or more of the following:

- Individual, group, and/or family psychotherapy
- Medical care and monitoring
- Nutritional counseling
- Medications

## **RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO YOU**

National Eating Disorders Association Helpline: 1-800-931-2237

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders: 1-630-577-1330

National Institute of Health's Eating Disorders Website: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders/index.shtml>

National Eating Disorders Association Website: <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/about-us>