

Eating Disorders

Common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. People who have these conditions are obsessed with food and/or body weight. Eating disorders are a way to cope. They are serious health problems and are more common in females than in males.

Signs and Symptoms

For Anorexia Nervosa

- Loss of a lot of weight in a short period of time.
- Intense, irrational fear of weight gain and/or of looking fat. Obsession with fat, calories, and weight.
- A need to be perfect or in control in one area of life.
- Distorted body image. The person feels and sees herself or himself as fat despite being a normal weight for height and age.
- Marked physical signs. These include loss of hair, slowed heart rate, and low blood pressure. The person feels cold due to decreased body temperature. In females, menstrual periods can stop.

For Bulimia Nervosa

- Repeated acts of binge eating and purging. Purging can be through vomiting; taking laxatives, water pills, and/or diet pills; fasting; and exercising a lot to “undo” the binge.
- Excessive concern about body weight.
- Being underweight, normal weight, or overweight.
- Dieting often.
- Dental problems. Mouth sores. Chronic sore throat.
- Spending a lot of time in bathrooms.
- Because of binge-purge cycles, severe health problems can occur. These include an irregular heartbeat and damage to the stomach, kidneys, and bones.

For Binge Eating Disorder

- Periods of nonstop eating that are not related to hunger.
- Impulsive bingeing on food without purging.
- Dieting and/or fasting over and over.
- Weight can range from normal weight to mild, moderate, or severe obesity.

Causes and Risk Factors

An exact cause has not been found.

Persons from all backgrounds, ages, and genders are affected. Risk factors include:

- A family history of eating disorders.
- Pressure from society to be thin.
- Personal and family pressures.
- Sexual, physical, or alcohol abuse in the past.
- Fear of starting puberty.
- Fear of having sex.
- Pressure for athletes to lose weight or to be thin for competitive sports.
- Chronic dieting.



Eating Disorders, continued

Treatment

- Counseling. This can be individual, family, group, and/or behavioral therapy.
- Support groups.
- Medication.
- Nutrition therapy.
- Outpatient treatment.
- Hospitalization, if needed.



Eating disorders need professional treatment.

Treatment varies with the disorder and how severe it is. The earlier the condition is diagnosed and treated, the better the outcome.

Questions to Ask

Are you thinking about or making plans for suicide?

YES



NO

With abnormal eating, do you have 2 or more of these problems?

- Rapid tooth decay.
- Low body temperature. Cold hands and feet.
- Thin hair (or hair loss) on the head. Baby-like hair on the body.
- Problems with digestion. Bloating. Constipation.
- Three or more missed periods in a row.
- Times when you are depressed, euphoric and/or hyperactive.
- Tiredness or tremors.
- Lack of concentration.

YES



NO

Do you hoard food, force yourself to vomit, and/or spend a lot of time in the bathroom from taking laxatives and/or water pills?

YES



NO

Did you binge and purge, fast, diet, and/or exercise on purpose to lose more than 10 pounds and do you have any of these problems?

- An intense fear of gaining weight or of getting fat.
- You see yourself as fat, but you are at normal weight or are underweight.
- You diet and exercise in excess after you have reached your goal weight.

YES



NO

Do you eat a large amount of food within 2 hours and can't control the amount of food you eat or can't stop eating? Do you also do at least three of these things?

- You eat very fast.
- You eat until you feel uncomfortable.
- You eat when you are not hungry.
- You eat alone, because you are embarrassed.
- You feel depressed, disgusted, and/or guilty after you overeat.

YES



NO



See Self-Care on next page

Flowchart continued in next column

Self-Care

Eating disorders need professional treatment.

To Help Prevent an Eating Disorder

- Learn to accept yourself and your body. You don't need to look like anyone else. Spend time with people who accept you as you are, not people who focus on "thinness."
- Know that self-esteem does not have to depend on body weight.
- Eat nutritious foods. Focus on whole grains, beans, fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy foods, and low-fat meats.
- Commit to a goal of normal eating. Realize that this will take time. It will also take courage to fight fears of gaining weight.
- Don't skip meals. If you do, you are more likely to binge when you eat.
- Avoid white flour, sugar and foods high in sugar and fat, such as cakes, cookies, and pastries. Bulimics tend to binge on junk food. The more they eat, the more they want.
- Get regular, moderate exercise 3 to 4 times a week. If you exercise more than your doctor advises, do non-exercise activities with family and friends.
- Find success in things you do. Hobbies, work, school, etc. can promote self-esteem.
- Learn as much as you can about eating disorders from books and organizations that deal with them.
- To help their children avoid eating disorders, parents should promote a balance between their child's competing needs for independence and family involvement.

To Treat an Eating Disorder

- Follow your treatment plan.
- Attend counseling sessions and/or support group meetings as scheduled.
- Identify feelings before, during, and after you overeat, binge, purge, or restrict food intake. What is it that you are hoping the food will do?
- Set small goals that you can easily reach. Congratulate yourself for every success. This is a process. Accept set backs. Learn from them.
- Talk to someone instead of turning to food.
- Work toward the point where weight is no longer a way you rate your success. Think about your accomplishments, positive personal qualities, and valued relationships.
- Learn to express your rights. You have the right to say no and the right to express your feelings and your opinions. You have the right to ask that your needs are met.
- Keep a journal of your progress, feelings, thoughts, etc., but not about what you eat. The journal is just for you, not for others to read or judge. This is a safe place to be honest with yourself. The journal can also help you identify your "triggers" so that you can deal with them in the future.
- Don't let the scale run your life. Better yet, throw out the scale!



*Keep a journal of
your progress.*

For Information, Contact:

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)
Information and Referral Helpline
800.931.2237
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org