

Eating Disorders



- Eating disorders are illnesses with serious, potentially life-threatening effects on a person's physical and mental health.
- Individuals with eating disorders have severe, persistent, and unhealthy thoughts and behaviors about food.
- The three most widely recognized eating disorders are binge eating disorder, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa.
- With treatment, as well as support from family and friends, people with eating disorders can achieve complete recovery.

Eating disorders are not a lifestyle choice. They are serious illnesses which affect the body's ability to get proper nutrition. They can lead to health problems involving the heart, kidneys, and digestion, and in some cases may be life-threatening. Individuals with eating disorders have severe, persistent, and unhealthy thoughts and behaviors about food. As a result, they might eat far too little or far too much. The three most widely recognized eating disorders are binge eating disorder, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa. Learning more about eating disorders can help people identify warning signs and seek treatment early.

Binge Eating Disorder

Binge eating disorder is the most common eating disorder in the United States. About 3.5% of adult women and 2% of adult men have binge eating disorder. Binge eating is not just frequent episodes of eating large amounts of food. People with binge eating disorder experience a loss of control over their eating, feeling as though they cannot stop. They eat well beyond feeling full, often experiencing physical discomfort. Unlike bulimia nervosa (see below), periods of binge eating are not followed by purging, excessive exercise, or fasting. As a result, people with binge eating disorder are often overweight or obese. However, it is important to note that most people with obesity do not have binge eating disorder.

Symptoms of binge eating disorder include:

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

Bulimia Nervosa

People with bulimia nervosa have recurrent episodes of eating unusually large amounts of food and feeling a lack of control over these episodes. This binge eating is followed by behaviors that compensate for the overeating, such as forced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives or diuretics, fasting, excessive exercise, or a combination of these behaviors. People with bulimia nervosa may maintain a normal weight or be overweight. Symptoms of bulimia nervosa include:

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



Wheeler

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Anorexia Nervosa

Individuals with anorexia nervosa avoid food, severely restrict food intake, or eat very small quantities of only certain foods. Even when dangerously underweight, they may see themselves as overweight. They may also weigh themselves repeatedly. There are two subtypes of anorexia nervosa: a restrictive subtype and binge-purge subtype. People with the restrictive subtype of anorexia nervosa place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they eat. Individuals with the binge-purge subtype of anorexia nervosa also place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they eat. In addition, they may have binge eating and purging behaviors such as vomiting and/or use of laxatives or diuretics.

Symptoms of anorexia nervosa include:

- Extreme thinness (emaciation) a result of severely restricted eating and/or intensive and excessive exercise
- Relentless pursuit of thinness and an unwillingness to maintain a healthy weight
- 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
- Osteopenia or osteoporosis (thinning of the bones)
- Mild anemia and muscle wasting and weakness
- Dry and yellowish skin, and growth of fine hair all over the body (lanugo)
- Lethargy, sluggishness, or feeling tired all the time
- Low blood pressure and slowed breathing and pulse
- Damage to the structure and function of the heart
- Drop in internal body temperature, causing a person to feel cold all the time
- Brain damage and/or multiorgan failure

Anorexia nervosa can be fatal; it has the highest mortality rate (death) of any mental disorder. People with anorexia may die from medical conditions and complications associated with starvation.

How Are Eating Disorders Treated?

It is important to seek treatment early for eating disorders. Individuals with eating disorders are at a higher risk for suicide and medical complications. Many people with eating disorders may not think they need treatment. Family members and friends can help a loved one find a qualified health professional with expertise in treating eating disorders.

Treatment plans for eating disorders include psychotherapy, medical care and monitoring, nutritional counseling, medications, or a combination of these approaches. Specific forms of psychotherapy (“talk therapy”) and cognitive behavioral approaches can be effective for treating specific eating disorders. Research also suggests that medications may help treat some eating disorders and co-occurring anxiety or depression related to eating disorders. Information about medication changes frequently, making it important to discuss treatment with a qualified health care provider with expertise in treating eating disorders. Typical treatment goals include restoring adequate nutrition, bringing weight to a healthy level, reducing excessive exercise, and stopping binge-purge and binge-eating behaviors. Complete recovery is possible.

National Institute of Mental Health, 2016
www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders/index.shtml

NIH News In Health, 2017, <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2017/11/when-food-consumes-you>

Connecticut Resources

**CT Department of Mental
Health and Addiction Services**
www.ct.gov/DMHAS

United Way 2-1-1
www.211ct.org or call 2.1.1

National Resources

**National Institute of Mental
Health (NIMH)**
www.nimh.nih.gov

NEDA
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

**National Suicide
Prevention Lifeline**
1-800-273-8255



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