

Eating disorders involve issues of body image, exercise, dieting, and other aspects of life - as well as food.

# Eating Disorders



Many young people have concerns about eating or body image at some stage, but most do not develop an eating disorder. Eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia are more common in females but also affect males. They can have a very serious effect on your life, and can be life-threatening. Early detection and effective treatment increases the chance that you will do well.



## What are eating disorders?

Concerns about weight, appearance and eating habits are very common. They become a problem when they begin to affect your physical or mental health and well-being. Many young people with an eating disorder do not seek help, but instead try to hide the problems from their family and friends.

## Symptoms of eating disorders can include:

- Excessive dieting or overeating
- Thinking and talking a lot about body image, body weight and food
- Avoiding social situations that involve food
- Eating only certain types and amounts of food
- Becoming irritable or withdrawing from friends and family
- Wearing loose fitting clothing to hide weight loss
- Wanting to eat alone
- 'Playing' with food rather than eating it
- Excessive exercise
- Feeling faint, dizzy and weak
- Going to the bathroom straight after meals
- Difficulty concentrating
- Often feeling tired and low.

## Types of eating disorder

People with either anorexia or bulimia are preoccupied with body weight and their control over eating.

### People with anorexia might:

- Refuse to eat enough food despite being hungry
- Have a strong fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though they are underweight
- Have inaccurate perceptions of their body
- Deny serious weight loss
- Stop having menstrual periods (if female)
- Exercise excessively
- Force themselves to vomit after eating, or use diuretics or laxatives to reduce their weight.

### People with bulimia might:

- Repeatedly binge eat, consuming large quantities of food that is often high in fat or sugar
- Feel out of control when bingeing
- Try to make up for binges and avoid weight gain by making themselves vomit, or by using laxatives or diuretics, fasting, or excessive exercise.

People with bulimia often have a compulsive cycle of binge/purge/exercise/binge. They usually manage to keep to a healthy weight, so the problem is hard for others to recognise.



### Health problems from eating disorders

Eating disorders can lead to serious physical health problems. Starvation or repeated cycles of bingeing and purging can cause damaging changes in the body. Starvation, for example, can lead to osteoporosis (weakening of the bones), kidney problems, headaches, constipation or diarrhoea, fainting and heart problems. Vomiting after eating can expose the teeth to stomach acid and cause decay, and also cause sore throats, heart problems and abdominal pain. Laxatives can cause either constipation or diarrhoea, as well as dehydration and bowel disease.

Eating disorders can also lead to difficulties in concentrating, then problems in studying or at work. They also increase the chance of having depression, anxiety, substance misuse, irritability and moodiness.

### Getting help for an eating disorder

If you are worried that a friend or family member has an eating disorder, then first of all let them know that you are worried and care about them. Even if they deny there is a problem and do not want to talk about it, gently encourage them to seek professional help.

Help is available from general practitioners (GPs), school counsellors, psychologists and specialist mental health workers.

### Treatment of eating disorders

People with eating disorders will benefit from professional help. Keeping the person safe is the first priority. If the weight loss is severe and there are serious health complications, then a stay in hospital may be needed.

Treatment starts with developing a good working relationship with the young person, then moves on to providing information, establishing healthy patterns of eating and exercise, and looking after physical health. Individual counselling, family work and medication (when appropriate) might all be required, usually provided by a treatment team.

For more information, and to find out how to get help, visit the headspace website: [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)