

Eating Disorders

People sometimes think that eating disorders are a lifestyle choice or that a person is just unnecessarily preoccupied with food, body weight, and shape. In reality however, such preoccupation may be a sign of an eating disorder, which is actually a serious illness that can be fatal.

Eating problems are associated with severe disturbances in people's thoughts and emotions. They can start as a result of trauma or another mental health condition as well as wishing to achieve an unrealistic body image, making it difficult to nourish oneself properly. Eating disorders can be dangerous and can have serious health implications if body weight drops too low or rises too high. In many instances, they have caused death. Although eating disorders are most often associated with adolescent girls, the number of boys with eating disorders is rising steadily. Common eating disorders include anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

- i. Anorexia Nervosa is characterised by excessive worrying about body weight and the desire to eat less and less food. 'Feeling fat' despite being extremely thin, and inaccurately comparing bodyweight with other people's, are almost universal experiences for sufferers of anorexia. Exercising too much is also extremely common among young people with anorexia, though they may eventually lack the ability to do this as physical symptoms progress.
- ii. Bulimia shares with anorexia the characteristics of obsession with body image and bodyweight, but rather than trying to minimise eating, those with bulimia will eat to excess and then use vomiting or laxatives to try to lose weight. This 'purging' can give a sense of control to young people who feel a lack of control over the rest of their lives. Bulimia has serious physical consequences such as damage to tooth enamel and brittle bones in long term cases.

DON'T FORGET

Be gentle with yourself

Common signs of eating disorders in young people

Early warning signs common to a range of eating disorders include:

- › Withdrawal from friends and family
- › Avoidance of meals or situations where food may be present
- › Preoccupation with weight, body size and shape, or specific aspects of appearance
- › Consumption of laxatives, diuretics or diet pills
- › Extreme fatigue, including dizziness and fainting

Early warning signs specific to bulimia include:

- › Habitual trips to the bathroom immediately after eating
- › Hoarding large amounts of food
- › Concealing food containers and wrappers

Early warning signs specific to anorexia include:

- › Constant adherence to increasingly strict diets, regardless of weight
- › Significant weight loss in a short period of time
- › Refusing offers of food

Diagnosis and treatments for eating disorders

As with other mental illnesses, the early intervention of mental health professionals is a critical early step in symptom management and recovery. This usually begins with an appointment with a GP, who will then refer your child to specialist eating disorder services.



The treatment for eating disorders will usually involve some kind of talking therapy, as well as the support of a qualified nutritionist who will help in the recovery from the physical symptoms of eating disorders and work with the young person to develop healthier eating habits.

Those with the most severe eating disorders may require a period of inpatient care at a hospital, where more intensive therapy and nutritional support is provided daily.

If you see signs of an eating disorder in a friend, talk to them about it. It is common for teenagers with eating disorders to become withdrawn and defensive, making it difficult to talk with them, especially if they still can't accept they have a problem. But talking about their condition is essential for their recovery, so keep trying. It might be difficult for them to express their feelings, so be patient and listen to what they're trying to say. Avoid talking about their appearance, even if it's meant as a compliment as this will make them more defensive. And if you recognise symptoms of an eating disorder in yourself, talk to someone urgently. Talking about it is the first step to healing.

Try not to focus too much on portion sizes, calories or the fat content of your meal. Enjoy your meal and try to make conversation with others during mealtimes. This can help distract from wanting to purge or over exercise.

Be aware that there is a range of professional help available, and say you'll support them through it. Suggest activities they could do that don't involve food, such as hobbies and days out with friends.