

Adult Eating Disorders

What are Eating Disorders?

Eating Disorders are characterized by disturbances in eating behaviors as well as feelings of distress and extreme concern about body image and weight. These disorders involve unhealthy patterns of eating such as extreme reduction of food intake or severe patterns of overeating sometimes followed by purging (using methods to rid oneself of food taken in).

There are three main Eating Disorders: Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia, and Binge Eating Disorder.

According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), eating disorders affect both women and men. However, they are more commonly found in women than in men. Eating Disorders may have serious and potentially life-threatening consequences including electrolyte imbalances in the body and serious heart conditions, which could lead to cardiac arrest.

Eating disorders frequently co-occur with other mental illnesses such as:

- Depression
- Substance abuse
- Anxiety disorders

Main Categories of Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa

People experiencing Anorexia are extremely concerned with their weight and do not maintain a healthy body weight, consistent with height and age. They may perceive themselves to be overweight even when extremely underweight. In order to manage their weight, they may severely restrict their diet, purge what is consumed, and/or even exercise excessively.

Diet restriction may include:

- Avoiding meals
- Eating a few foods in small amounts
- Weighing foods and restricting calorie intake

Bulimia Nervosa

Symptoms of Bulimia include frequent episodes of eating excessive amounts of food and then almost immediately vomiting, using laxatives or diuretics, fasting, and/or extreme exercising in order to rid their bodies of the food. These behaviors are performed in secrecy and are often accompanied by feelings of disgust and shame at bingeing, followed by relief when purging. People who have been diagnosed with Bulimia Nervosa tend to be highly concerned with their body shape and weight.

Health consequences related to bulimia include:

- Inflammation of the esophagus
- Tooth decay and staining
- Peptic ulcers
- Electrolyte imbalances

Binge Eating Disorder

When someone loses the ability to control how much food they are eating they may be experiencing Binge Eating Disorder. Unlike bulimia nervosa, periods of binge eating are not followed by purging, excessive exercise, or fasting. They experience guilt, shame and distress about their eating habits which can lead to more binge eating. Examples of Binge Eating disorder behaviors include:

- Eating more rapidly than normal
- Eating until feeling uncomfortably full
- Eating large amounts of food when not feeling physically hungry
- Eating alone because of embarrassment of the amount of food eaten
- Feeling disgusted and guilty after overeating

People who have been diagnosed with this disorder are often overweight or obese. Some common health consequences of Binge Eating disorder include:

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Heart disease
- Diabetes

What Causes Eating Disorders?

Eating Disorders are complex and may result from the interaction of many factors including:

- Psychological factors
- Social factors
- Biological factors
- Behavioral factors
- Genetic factors

Television, fashion magazines and movies value thinness and promote the goal of having a perfect body. They promote the idea that one must be thin in order to be liked and recognized. Individuals who have not developed healthy, adaptive ways to deal with stress and to manage strong feelings may instead focus on control of their food intake. Individuals who have been diagnosed with Eating Disorders often experience a poor sense of self and low self-esteem. They attempt to master emotions and gain a sense of control by achieving a perfect ideal of thinness because they believe that being thin will lead to happiness.

Warning signs of eating disorders are:

- A marked increase or decrease in weight not related to a medical condition
- The development of abnormal eating habits such as severe dieting, preference for strange foods, withdrawn or ritualized behavior at mealtime or secretive bingeing
- An intense preoccupation with weight and body image
- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Self-induced vomiting, periods of fasting, or laxative, diet pill or diuretic abuse
- Feelings of isolation, depression or irritability
- Loss of menstrual periods
- Intense fear of weight gain and of being "fat"
- Feeling "fat" despite dramatic weight loss

How Can Eating Disorders Be Treated?

Eating disorders require comprehensive treatment plans due to their complexity. They may require a range of interventions such as:

Source: <http://www.mhawestchester.org/content/adult-eating-disorders#anorexia>
07/2015

- Individual psychotherapy
- Group therapy
- Family or marital therapy

Psychotherapy or counseling addresses psychological disturbances such as body image, low self-esteem, and interpersonal conflicts. Additionally, the following can be effective:

- Nutritional rehabilitation and counseling
- Psychosocial interventions (such as self-help or support groups, education about the condition)
- Medication management strategies

With Anorexia, sometimes the initial goal of treatment includes ensuring a healthy weight. This may require medical treatment such as hospitalization. Once malnutrition has been corrected and weight gain has begun, individual psychotherapy and family therapy can help people overcome low self-esteem and address distorted thought and behavior patterns. Supportive therapy and self-help groups may follow to provide ongoing support in the community.

Additional Information about Eating Disorders

[National Institute of Mental Health](#)

NIMH is an agency of the United States government. This site has clear information about mental health conditions and provides information on how individuals and family members can recognize symptoms of disordered eating, and get the help they need.

[National Eating Disorders Association \(NEDA\)](#)

NEDA is a large non-profit organization focused on supporting and advocating for those affected by eating disorders. This site provides information about eating disorders and resources for obtaining support, including a confidential helpline.