

what are eating disorders?

Eating disorders involve disturbed eating habits or weight control behaviour that disrupts a person's physical and psychosocial functioning. *Disturbed eating habits* may take the form of restricted food intake, strict dietary rules, preoccupation with food, and altered mealtime behaviours. *Disturbed weight control behaviour* can include excessive exercise, self-induced vomiting and misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas.

The consequences of eating disorders can be devastating. Sufferers can experience dramatic personality changes, fatigue, apathy, social withdrawal, and extreme preoccupation with food, weight and shape. Medical complications include tooth decay, lowered hormone levels and bone density loss. More serious medical consequences include heart problems and, in extreme circumstances, death.



Eating disorders are more common in women than in men. Approximately 10% of cases tend to be men, but this might be an underestimation. Eating disorders may be underdiagnosed in men because they are less likely to seek help. Types of eating disorders include Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Atypical Eating Disorders.

Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia Nervosa is often developed during adolescence and if not treated can continue into adulthood. Approximately 2% of women will be affected by Anorexia Nervosa at some point in their lives.

Those with Anorexia Nervosa experience the following symptoms:

- Extreme thinness, weighing less than 85% of recommended weight for their age and height.
- An intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat despite being underweight.
- Viewing their body as much larger than it is in reality. This negative evaluation of body shape has a considerable effect on self-evaluation.
- Women who have started menstruating experience amenorrhoea (miss at least three periods in a row).
- Eating very little and/or exercising excessively.
- Binge eating/purging behaviours (including vomiting after eating or laxative misuse).
- Anorexia Nervosa is associated with serious medical complications, which can result in death.

Bulimia Nervosa

Approximately 3% of people experience Bulimia Nervosa, which is characterised by:

- Recurrent episodes of binge eating. A binge is:
 - a) the consumption of an amount of food that is definitely larger than most people would eat in similar circumstances,
 - b) within a limited period of time (eg. two hours)
- A feeling of losing control over eating during the binge.
- Recurrent inappropriate behaviour that aims to compensate for the binge eating episodes. This can include excessive exercise, self-induced vomiting, fasting, or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas.
- Binge eating and compensatory behaviour is frequent (eg. occurs at least twice a week for three months)
- Body weight and shape has an undue influence on self-evaluation.

Atypical Eating Disorder

This term is used to describe eating disorders that do not fit into the other categories. It is estimated that for every person diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, there are another 2-3 people who fall into this category. Just because a person's symptoms don't quite fit the criteria of Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, it doesn't mean that their eating disorder isn't serious.



Binge Eating Disorder

Binge eating disorder is characterised by periods of binge eating without compensatory behaviour such as vomiting or excessive exercise. Men and women are both equally affected. Symptoms include:

- Feeling out of control over eating behaviours
- Eating more rapidly than normal
- Periods of uncontrolled, impulsive or continuous eating to the point of being uncontrollably full
- Eating when not physically hungry
- Eating alone because of feeling ashamed and disgusted about eating behaviours
- Repeated episodes of binge-eating which often results in feelings of shame or guilt
- Eating in secret

Getting Help

Although some cases of eating disorders can improve spontaneously, most require professional assistance. Your General Practitioner can assist you with managing your health and eating, and with finding a Psychologist or Counsellor to help you recover.