

Eating Disorders

Eating Disorders by the Numbers

About 8 million Americans have an eating disorder:
7 million women
and 1 million men

The prevalence of most eating disorders is similar among non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asians in the United States, but anorexia nervosa is more common among non-Hispanic whites

95 percent of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25

Eating disorders are prevalent among overweight youths

50 percent of girls between the ages of 11 and 13 have attempted to lose weight

80 percent of 13-year-olds have attempted to lose weight

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness

An eating disorder is an illness that causes serious disturbances to the everyday diet. There are several types of eating disorders, including eating a very small or very large amount of food. Some other symptoms of eating disorders are anxiety, control issues, and concern about body weight or shape.

Types of Eating Disorders

There are three main categories of eating disorders: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.

Anorexia Nervosa

The first type, anorexia nervosa, is characterized by extremely restrictive eating and strict, self-inflicted food “rules,” such as eating very small portions of only specific foods. Those with anorexia nervosa have an intense fear of weight gain. They have a distorted body image and view themselves as overweight even if they are extremely underweight. They are constantly trying to lose weight and will typically weigh themselves at least once a day.

These are some of the physical signs and symptoms of anorexia:

- emaciation (severe thinness)
- lack of menstrual cycle (in women)
- infertility
- brittle hair and nails
- dry skin
- thinning bones
- muscle wasting
- anemia
- heart and brain damage
- low body temperature
- growth of lanugo (fine hair) over entire body, and
- extreme lethargy.

Anorexia can even cause organ failure if it is left untreated for too long.

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by uncontrolled eating of abnormally large amounts of food (binge eating) followed by forced vomiting, using diuretics or laxatives, excessive exercise, fasting, or some combination of these. Afterwards, a person with bulimia may feel guilt and shame, causing another cycle of eating and bingeing. They feel a lack of control when it comes to eating and not bingeing.

Bulimia, like anorexia, is characterized by fear of gaining weight, body image distortion, and a desperate desire to lose weight. Unlike those with anorexia, those with bulimia are often average weight or overweight. Some of the symptoms include swollen salivary glands, worn tooth enamel, acid reflux, and intestinal distress.

Binge Eating

Binge-Eating disorder is marked by the same loss of control and binge eating as bulimia but without its purging, excessive exercising, or similar behaviors. People affected by binge eating are likely to be overweight or obese. Often, binges are caused by excessive feelings of guilt or shame caused by everyday stresses or even the disorder itself.

Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS)

Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified is a fourth, lesser-known category of eating disorders. EDNOS is the diagnosis given to those individuals who have disordered eating but do not fit the criteria for bulimia, anorexia, or binge-eating disorder. A person who has a normal body mass index (BMI) but all the symptoms of anorexia could be diagnosed with EDNOS.



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Signs of an Eating Disorder

- Skipping meals frequently
- Making excuses for not eating
- Refusing to eat in public
- Cooking elaborate meals but refusing to eat any
- Withdrawing from normal social activities
- Adopting rigid meal or eating rituals
- Developing a distorted body image
- Using dietary supplements for weight loss
- Checking in the mirror frequently for perceived flaws

Steps for Family and Friends

In general, people with eating disorders do not realize they are sick and need help. Friends and family members are important sources of support and guidance. If you suspect someone you love has an eating disorder, here's how you can help:

Find out more

The first thing you should do is become informed. Go to a trustworthy website and read the general information on eating disorders offered there. Here are some reliable sources:

- National Eating Disorder Association (www.nationaleatingdisorders.org or helpline at 1-800-931-2237)
- National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders Inc. (www.anad.org)
- National Eating Disorder Information Centre (www.nedic.ca)
- National Institute of Mental Health – Eating Disorders (NIMH) (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders/index.shtml>)
- Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action (www.eatingdisorderscoalition.org)

Talk to them

When you talk to your friend or family member, here are some ways to make the conversation easier for both of you:

- Talk in private at a set time and place.
- Tell him or her your concerns. Give specific examples that illustrate why you are concerned.

- Avoid conflict and placing blame. Communicate your feelings using “I” statements. For example, instead of saying, “You are acting irresponsibly,” say, “I am concerned because you refuse to eat so often.”
- Offer your continued support. Do not try to give simple solutions, such as, “Just eat and this will go away.”

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