

Eating Disorders

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Eating disorders are medical conditions. They involve abnormal eating behaviors serious enough to cause heart conditions, kidney failure or other health problems.

The three most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. They often develop during adolescent years or early adulthood.

While it is most common for women to develop eating disorders, men can also develop eating disorders and are more likely to be undiagnosed.

Eating disorders are complex, chronic (long-lasting) conditions that are treatable. They often occur along with other problems such as depression, substance abuse or anxiety disorders. The earlier an eating disorder is diagnosed and treated, the better the chance of successful treatment and recovery.

Anorexia Nervosa

This is a very serious condition that can lead to starving to death. People with this disorder think they weigh too much even though they are usually dangerously underweight.

The popular notion that people with anorexia are perfectionists and overachievers is not accurate.

Many people who develop the condition actually have low self-esteem and lack confidence. They may be very critical of themselves and try hard to please others.

Common signs and symptoms of anorexia include:

- refusing to eat
- being extremely concerned about weight or body shape
- repeatedly dieting, fasting or exercising too much to achieve excessive weight loss
- inducing throwing up (vomiting)
- misusing laxatives, diuretics or enemas.

There are many physical side effects of anorexia:

- becoming too thin and losing muscle mass
- not being able to tolerate cold
- brittle hair and nails
- dry skin
- lower pulse rate
- constipation or diarrhea
- mild anemia
- loss of monthly menstrual periods
- swollen joints.

Anorexia carries some long-term effects. Poor nutrition may cause heart problems or heart failure, osteoporosis (thin bones) or death from starvation.

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Bulimia Nervosa

People with bulimia follow a “binge and purge” routine — they consume a large amount of food and then rid their body of it.

Most people with bulimia have a normal weight or are slightly overweight, so it can be difficult to see they have a problem. They may go long periods of time without binge eating and purging. Then an emotional upset such as depression, boredom or anger will trigger the condition again.

People who have a hard time controlling impulses, stress and anxiety are more at risk for developing bulimia.

Common signs and symptoms of bulimia include:

- being extremely concerned about weight or body shape
- consuming a large amount of food within a specific time period
- inducing throwing up or misusing laxatives, diuretics or diet pills to get rid of the food.

Health risks from bulimia, especially from throwing up, include:

- reduced potassium levels that can lead to heart muscle damage or cardiac arrest
- inflamed esophagus
- eroded teeth enamel
- salivary gland damage.

Binge Eating Disorder

This eating disorder also involves repeated uncontrolled eating. It is different from bulimia, however, because it does not involve throwing up, excessive exercising or using products to get rid of the food. Binge eating often involves emotional eating.

Binge eating disorder can develop in people of all ages. It often leads to excessive weight gain or obesity from the large amounts of food consumed over time.

Health problems that develop from this disorder are similar to those for obesity:

- high cholesterol levels
- high blood pressure
- diabetes
- depression
- increased risk for gallbladder disease, heart disease and some types of cancer.

Treating Eating Disorders

Because eating disorders are complex, treatment often includes a number of health care professionals such as a:

- registered dietitian
- mental health provider
- health care provider or other specialist.

Individual or group therapy, self-esteem or assertiveness classes, and antidepressants or other medicines may be part of the treatment plan.

If you or someone close to you is in crisis, call the toll-free, 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).