



Eating Disorders

At any given time, 10% or more of high school and college students report symptoms of eating disorders. Many more experience some degree of distress related to eating and weight. The most common eating disorders include Anorexia Nervosa (self starvation), Bulimia Nervosa (binging and purging), and Binge Eating Disorder.

What Is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia Nervosa is self-imposed starvation due to an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat. People with this condition have a very distorted body image – thinking that they are fat when, in fact, they become very underweight (15% or more below healthy body weight). Signs of this disorder may include:

- Rigid, restricted eating patterns
- Avoidance of social situations involving food
- Excessive compulsive exercise and/or study habits
- A preoccupation with food and weight
- Signs of malnutrition (weakness, feeling cold, dizziness, dry skin and hair, constipation).

What Is Bulimia Nervosa?

Bulimia Nervosa, known as the “binge-purge” syndrome, is a condition in which a person has recurrent episodes of binge eating and purging. During a binge, the person uncontrollably consumes a very large number of calories in a short period of time. This results in feelings of guilt, disgust, and fear. The person, in turn, resorts to any number of methods to get rid of the excess calories including vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, fasting, and excessive exercise. Signs of this disorder may include:

- Rapid weight fluctuations
- Swollen glands that give a chipmunk appearance
- Red, puffy, bloodshot eyes
- Severe dental decay and cuts on fingers
- Compulsive exercise and frequent depression.

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What Is Binge Eating?

Binge eating disorder involves recurrent episodes of binge eating which results in feelings of guilt, disgust, depression, and extreme distress. While there is no purging, there may be sporadic fasting or repetitive dieting. People suffering from this disease may gain a large amount of weight, which may lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, joint problems, and heart and gall bladder disease.

What Causes Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders are caused by a combination of cultural and psychological issues, personality traits, physiological imbalances, and learned behavior. Society places a great deal of emphasis on being thin, especially for women. This is expressed through the media, advertising, family, and peers.

People with eating disorders tend to be perfectionists, compulsive, and high achievers, and they strive to attain society's unrealistic thin ideal. In addition, they frequently suffer from depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, and many have histories of physical abuse and/or alcoholism in their families.

Finally, the new pressures of college life may cause many students to use food in unhealthy ways – either over or under-eating to cope with stress.

Why Can't I Just Stop?

Because eating disorders are caused by many factors, treatment should combine several types of therapy possibly including: individual, group, or family psychotherapy; nutrition counseling; and drug therapy for underlying depression, anxiety, or other psychiatric disorders. Although repeated or long-term treatments may be necessary, eating disorders are controllable.

For more information on how to help yourself or a friend with an eating problem, please visit www.snac.ucla.edu.

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UNDERSTANDING DISORDERED EATING

The college environment presents many new challenges and pressures. Depending on cultural, biological, and familial background, different individuals react to these pressures in a variety of ways. Some people use healthy coping skills and stress management techniques, while others develop unhealthy behavior patterns such as under or overeating. In some cases, an unhealthy approach to eating is severe enough to be classified as a clinical disorder with life-threatening consequences.

Anorexia Nervosa

The clinical definition of anorexia nervosa includes: 1) weight loss to a point that is 15% or more below normal body weight, 2) intense fear of becoming fat, 3) distorted body image, and 4) for females, absence of three or more consecutive menstrual periods. More than 90% of people with anorexia are women, usually 13-17 years of age at the time of onset. As weight loss progresses, serious problems may develop such as stress fractures, low blood pressure, decreased kidney function, and deterioration of the heart muscle that can lead to death.

Bulimia Nervosa

The clinical definition of bulimia nervosa includes: 1) recurrent episodes of binge eating, 2) feeling a lack of control during binges, 3) regular use of self-induced vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, strict dieting or fasting, and/or vigorous exercise to get rid of unwanted calories, and 4) persistent concern with body shape and weight. People suffering from this disorder are not as easy to identify because they usually are at average or slightly above average body weight and are very secretive about their eating patterns. As bulimia progresses, constipation and digestive disorders, bleeding ulcers, and life-threatening heart irregularities may develop.

Compulsive Overeating

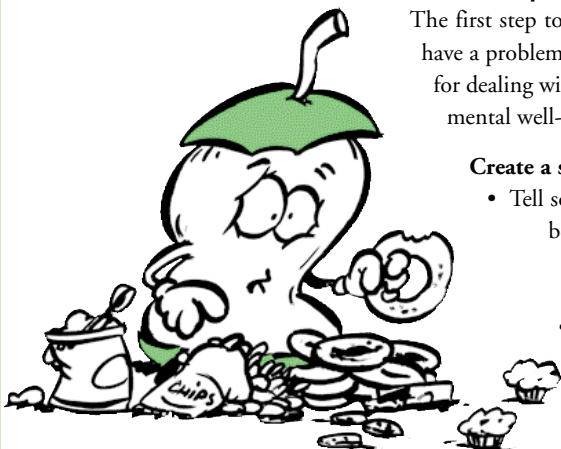
Compulsive overeaters are usually overweight and may become obese. As their weight increases, they are more likely to suffer from shortness of breath, high blood pressure, joint problems, heart and gallbladder disease, and diabetes.

How to Help Yourself If Disordered Eating Is Affecting Your Life

The first step toward overcoming disordered eating is to admit to yourself that you have a problem and need help. Once you've taken that first step, here are some tips for dealing with an unhealthy approach to eating and improving your physical and mental well-being.

Create a support system:

- Tell someone you trust about your problem and ask for help. This might be a friend, family member, health professional, or person with a similar problem. Remember that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Seek professional guidance (i.e., counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist, or Registered Dietitian).
- Join a self-help group.



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Learn about disordered eating and understand your particular situation:

- Understand the causes and effects of poor body image and disordered eating. Learn about your particular triggers to binge, starve, or otherwise abuse food.
- Discover what is a healthy weight for you. Health, fitness, success, and happiness come in all body shapes and sizes.

Take steps to fuel your body in healthy ways:

- Listen to and honor your body's internal signals for hunger and fullness.
- Understand the basics of good nutrition and how to plan, prepare, and enjoy healthy, well-balanced meals and snacks.

Nurture your inner self:

- Recognize your feelings and emotional needs. Be open about them to yourself and others.
- Quiet your mind through relaxation, meditation, and movement.
- Find fulfillment in everyday life by participating in activities you enjoy. Laugh, play, work, and strive for balance.
- Accept the fact that setbacks are part of progress. They are opportunities to learn more about your eating habits and how you can improve them. Be patient with yourself – recovery takes time, but it's well worth it!

What Should I Do If Someone I Know Has an Eating Disorder?

If you think that someone you care about has an eating disorder, talk to a professional about your concerns. This person may be able to help you evaluate your friend's situation, provide you with information on a particular eating disorder, and refer you to other local resources.

Tips on approaching a friend who has an eating disorder:

- Talk to your friend in a confidential, calm, and caring way. Avoid blaming her for doing something wrong or telling her she's acting crazy.
- Be specific about what you see, and use "I" statements to share your concerns. (*"I'm concerned about you because you refuse to eat breakfast and lunch and keep saying you're lightheaded."*)
- Focus on your concerns about your friend's health and well-being, not on her weight or appearance. (*"I've noticed that you are tired and sad all the time and haven't been eating much."*)
- Explain how the problem is affecting you and your relationship. (*"It's hard to be your friend when you're always worrying about your weight/diet."*)
- Give her hope that with help and persistence she can be free of the disorder and be happy again.
- Offer a written list of professional resources for help.
- Expect denial and excuses. People with eating disorders often insist that they do not need help.
- Be supportive and available when he needs someone. Listen to him with understanding, respect, and sensitivity.
- Know your limits. You cannot force someone to change his/her behavior or to seek help, but by sharing your concern, you are planting a seed which may help the person come to you later.

For more information on eating disorders:

- Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention - (206) 382-3587; www.edap.org
Offers prevention and awareness information, educational programs, videos, and workshops.
- National Association of Anorexia Nervosa & Associated Disorders - (847) 831-3438; www.anad.org
Offers a national listing of therapists and hospitals, informative materials, support groups, conferences, and a crisis hotline.
- Overeaters Anonymous - (505) 891-2664; www.overeatersanonymous.org
A nationwide, 12-step, self-help fellowship offering free local meetings (see telephone white pages under *Overeaters Anonymous*).