

Frequently Asked Questions

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder changes the way you eat and think about food. It can become a serious illness that causes problems for your physical and emotional health. A person with an eating disorder can become so concerned with food and weight that the disorder takes over their life.

What is anorexia?

Anorexia nervosa is dieting to an extreme. People who are anorexic feel they are fat even when they may be very underweight. They usually have an intense fear of being overweight. They may:

- Severely limit what they eat
- Diet nonstop
- Refuse to eat food that is not served in small portions
- Want to eat alone
- Exercise too much

People with anorexia go through many physical changes. They may:

- Lose a lot of weight and still think they are overweight
- Lose hair from their head
- Have skin that is dry, pale, and yellowed

Women and girls with anorexia may stop having [menstrual periods](#) .

What is bulimia?

People with [bulimia nervosa](#) binge eat and then purge the excess food. Binge eating means they eat large amounts of food in a short time. They may feel like they cannot control what they eat or how much they eat during a binge. Then they purge the excess food by forcing themselves to vomit. Or they do things to compensate for overeating, including taking laxatives, fasting, or exercising too much.

People with bulimia also go through physical changes. They may have:

- A constant sore throat
- Swollen salivary glands in the neck and jaw
- Worn tooth enamel and decaying teeth from stomach acid
- Acid reflux and intestinal problems
- Dehydration and an imbalance of the minerals needed to be healthy

What is binge eating disorder?

[Binge eating disorder](#) is when a person eats a very large amount of food in a short period of time. They do this over and over again. They may eat when they are not hungry and to the point that they are not comfortable. Afterward, they may feel disgusted, depressed, or guilty.

People with binge eating disorder usually do not purge the way people with bulimia do. Binge eating disorder is the most common eating disorder in the United States.

What are other types of eating disorders?

There are many types of eating disorders. Each has unique symptoms. Other types of eating disorders include the following:

- **Avoidant restrictive food intake disorder**—This is when you limit what you eat in an extreme way, but you're not worried about weight gain. You may eat only a few foods, or only food with certain textures.

- **Pica**—This is an urge to eat things that are not food, such as ice, soil, or paper. This disorder may be related to other health problems.
- **Rumination disorder**—This is when you bring food that you've swallowed back up into your mouth. You may then re-chew or re-swallow the food, or spit it out. A person with rumination disorder typically does this without effort and without feeling stressed or disgusted, unlike a person with bulimia who makes themselves vomit.

What causes eating disorders?

There is no single cause of eating disorders. Your **genes**, emotional health, and environment (including peer pressure and other social pressures) all may play a role.

What are the signs of an eating disorder?

Different eating disorders have different warning signs, but any of the following can mean there is a problem:

- Thinking too much about weight, food, calories, or dieting
- Feeling shame or guilt about your eating habits
- Body image distortion (an unrealistic view of how your body looks)
- Dieting nonstop (even when you are a normal weight or are underweight)
- Skipping meals to lose weight
- Refusing to eat except in small portions
- Wanting to eat alone
- Eating until you feel uncomfortable or sick
- Making yourself vomit
- Using diet pills, laxatives, or diuretics to control your weight
- Exercising too much

Who is most likely to have an eating disorder?

An eating disorder can happen to anyone, but women and girls are more likely to have one. So are teens and people in their early 20s. Eating disorders also are common in people who:

- Have a close family member with an eating disorder
- Take dieting too far
- Are under a lot of stress
- Are athletes (see [The Healthy Female Athlete](#))
- Have a perfectionist or obsessive personality
- Have experienced a recent trauma

How can eating disorders affect my health?

Over time, eating disorders can harm all parts of your body. Eating disorders can cause problems with:

- Memory, concentration, and other mental skills
- Major organs, including your heart, kidneys, bones, muscles, and brain
- Your reproductive health (you may stop having a menstrual period and have a hard time getting pregnant while you are underweight)

How are eating disorders diagnosed?

Eating disorders are diagnosed with a physical exam, lab tests, and screening questions. Your health care professional may ask you these or other questions:

- Do you make yourself sick because you feel uncomfortably full?
- Do you worry that you have lost control over how much you eat?
- Have you lost more than 14 pounds in 3 months?
- Do you think you are fat but others say you are too thin?
- Would you say that food is the focus of your life?

If you have an eating disorder, your health care professional may suggest you see a mental health professional. You and that person can talk more about your eating habits, exercise, behaviors, and beliefs.

How are eating disorders treated?

Learning to eat normally and get back to a healthy weight are key goals for treatment. Treatments that may be used include:

- Talk therapy, including family therapy or [cognitive behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#)
- Medication
- Counseling on nutrition
- Monitoring of your health and weight

Depression and anxiety are common in people with eating disorders. Treatment for these conditions includes therapy and medication.

Most people can get treatment as an outpatient (visiting a health care professional and going home the same day). If you are very underweight or very sick, you may need to stay at a hospital or other treatment facility.

What should I do if I have an eating disorder?

If you have an eating disorder, it is important to talk with a trusted adult or health care professional, such as an [obstetrician-gynecologist \(ob-gyn\)](#), right away. The sooner you ask for help, the better. Your health care professional may help you find a doctor who specializes in eating disorders or nutrition.

How can I help my family member or friend with an eating disorder?

If you think someone you care about has an eating disorder, it may help to:

- Learn about the eating disorder and the warning signs
- Talk with the person about your concerns in a calm and loving way
- Avoid making them feel guilty or ashamed of their eating habits
- Suggest that they see a health care professional
- Join a group for families and friends of people with eating disorders

See the [Resources](#) section below for a free helpline and support groups.

Glossary

Anorexia Nervosa: An eating disorder that causes a person to severely restrict food so they lose weight. People with this disorder fear weight gain and have a distorted body image.

Bulimia Nervosa: An eating disorder in which a person binges on food and then forces vomiting or abuses laxatives.

Binge Eating Disorder: An eating disorder in which a person repeatedly eats a large amount of food in a short period of time.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): A type of psychotherapy. During CBT, you learn specific skills that help you change the way you think about and cope with problems.

Genes: Segments of DNA that contain instructions for the development of a person's physical traits and control of the processes in the body. The gene is the basic unit of heredity and can be passed from parent to child.

Menstrual Periods: The monthly shedding of blood and tissue from the uterus.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

Resources

National Eating Disorders Association Helpline

[800-931-2237](tel:800-931-2237)

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support/contact-helpline>

Free helpline for support, resources, and treatment options for yourself or a loved one. Monday through Thursday 9 am to 9 pm ET, and Friday from 9 am to 5 pm ET. A chat option also is available on the website.

National Alliance on Mental Health: Family-to-Family Programs

<https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Programs/NAMI-Family-to-Family>

Free, 12-session educational program for loved ones of people with eating disorders and other mental health conditions.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

TFAQ005

Published: October 2020

Last reviewed: August 2022

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