

# Learning About Eating Disorders for Teens



## What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a condition that causes some people to have unhealthy thoughts and behaviors about food and body image. Teens with eating disorders often base how they feel about themselves on how much they weigh and how they look.

Common eating disorders include:

- **Anorexia.** Teens with this condition limit how much food they eat. They can become dangerously underweight.
- **Bulimia.** Teens with this condition eat a large amount of food in a short time. Then they do something to get rid of the food, like making themselves vomit, so they won't gain weight.
- **Binge eating disorder, or compulsive overeating.** Teens with this condition eat a large amount of food in a short time. They do this on a regular basis for several months.

## What are the symptoms?

Teens who have an eating disorder often strongly deny that they have one. They do not see or believe that they do. But there are some feelings and actions that are common with each type of eating disorder.

Teens who have anorexia may:

- Weigh much less than is healthy or normal.
- Be very afraid of gaining weight.
- Think they are overweight even when they are not.
- Obsess about food, weight, and dieting.
- Strictly limit how much they eat.
- Eat a large amount of food and then may vomit or use laxatives or water pills (diuretics) so they won't gain weight.
- Become secretive. They may pull away from family and friends, make excuses not to eat around other people, and lie about their eating habits.

Teens who have bulimia may:

- Eat a large amount of food in a short time (called bingeing), often over a couple of hours or less,

on a regular basis.

- Feel out of control and feel like they can't stop eating during a binge.
- Go to the bathroom right after meals.
- Eat a large amount of food but don't gain weight.
- Be secretive about eating, hide food, or avoid eating around other people.
- Purge to get rid of the food so they won't gain weight. They may make themselves vomit, exercise very hard or for a long time, or misuse laxatives, enemas, water pills, or other medicines.

**Teens with binge eating disorder may:**

- Eat a large amount of food in a short time, often over a couple of hours or less, on a regular basis.
- Feel like they can't stop eating and eat so much that they feel painfully full.
- Eat a large amount of food and may gain weight.
- Feel unhappy, upset, guilty, or depressed after they binge.
- Eat alone because they are embarrassed about how much they eat.

## **How are eating disorders treated?**

Treatment for eating disorders includes counseling and sometimes medicines. Some teens use both.

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy.** This can help teens who have an eating disorder change the way they think about food and the way they view their body. And it can help teens manage feelings or situations that may have brought on their eating disorder. Sometimes family members take part in a teen's therapy so that they can learn ways to support their loved one's recovery.
- **Nutritional counseling.** This can help teens get back to and stay at a healthy weight and learn healthy eating habits.
- **Medicines.** Most common are antidepressants, which can help reduce episodes of bingeing and purging or treat other problems teens may be dealing with, such as anxiety or depression.

No one should feel embarrassed or ashamed about having an eating disorder. It's not caused by personal weakness, and it isn't a character flaw. Many teens struggle with eating disorders for a long time.

If you think you have an eating disorder, get help. Some eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, need to be treated at an inpatient clinic. If left untreated, eating disorders can cause serious health problems. Treatment can help you feel better and be healthier. If you think a friend or a family member has an eating disorder, tell someone who can make a difference, like a parent, teacher, counselor, or doctor.

**Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety.** Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

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