

An eating disorder is an obsession with food and weight that harms a person's well-being. Although we all worry about our weight sometimes, people who have an eating disorder go to the extremes to keep from gaining weight. There are 2 main eating disorders: anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

What is anorexia?

Anorexia nervosa is an illness that usually occurs in teenage girls, but it also can occur in teenage boys, and in adult women and men. People who have anorexia are obsessed with being thin. They don't want to eat, and they are afraid of gaining weight. They may constantly worry about how many calories they take in or how much fat is in their food. They may take diet pills, laxatives or water pills to lose weight. They may exercise too much. People who have anorexia usually think they're fat even though they're very thin. They may get so thin that they look like they're sick. Anorexia isn't just a problem with food or weight. It's an attempt to use food and weight to deal with emotional problems.

What is bulimia?

Bulimia is eating a lot of food at once (called bingeing), and then throwing up or using laxatives to remove the food from the body (called purging). After a binge, some bulimics fast (don't eat) or over exercise to keep from gaining weight. People who have bulimia may also use water pills, laxatives or diet pills to "control" their weight. People who have bulimia often try to hide their bingeing and purging. They may hide food for binges. People who have bulimia are usually close to normal weight, but their weight may go up and down.

Did you know?

- 8,000,000 or more people in the United States have an eating disorder.
- 90% are women.
- Victims may be rich or poor.
- Eating disorders usually start in the teens but may begin as early as age 8.

Symptoms

What are the warning signs of anorexia?

- Deliberate self-starvation with weight loss
- Fear of gaining weight
- Refusal to eat or skipping meals
- Denial of hunger
- Wearing baggy clothes
- Constant exercising
- Greater amounts of hair on the body or the face
- Sensitivity to cold temperatures
- Absent or irregular periods in girls or women
- Loss of scalp hair
- A self-perception of being fat when the person is really too thin

What are the warning signs of an eating disorder?

The following are possible warning signs of anorexia and bulimia:

- Unnatural concern about body weight (even if the person is not overweight)
- Obsession with calories, fat grams and food
- Use of any medicines to keep from gaining weight (diet pills, laxatives, water pills)

More serious warning signs may be harder to notice because people who have an eating disorder try to keep it secret. Watch for these signs:

- Throwing up after meals
- Fainting
- Increased anxiety about weight
- Calluses or scars on the knuckle (from forced throwing up)
- Denying that there is anything wrong

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes eating disorders?

Doctors don't know exactly. Possible causes including feeling stressed out or upset about something in your life, or feeling like you need to be "in control." Society also puts a lot of pressure on people to be thin. This pressure can contribute too.

Why do some people get anorexia?

The reason some people get anorexia isn't known. People who have anorexia may believe they would be happier and more successful if they were thin. They want everything in their lives to be perfect. People who have this disorder are usually good students. They are involved in many school and community activities. They blame themselves if they don't get perfect grades, or if other things in life are not perfect.

Treatment

Can eating disorders be treated?

Yes. For people who have anorexia, the first step is getting back to a normal weight. If you're malnourished or very thin, you may be put in the hospital. Your doctor will probably want you to see a dietitian to learn how to pick healthy foods and eat at regular times. For both people who have anorexia and bulimia, family and individual counseling (talking about your feelings about your weight and problems in your life) is helpful.

What is the treatment for anorexia?

Treatment of anorexia is difficult, because people who have anorexia believe there is nothing wrong with them. Patients in the early stages of anorexia (less than 6 months or with just a small amount of weight loss) may be successfully treated without having to be admitted to the hospital. But for successful treatment, patients must want to change and must have family and friends to help them.

People who have more severe anorexia need care in the hospital, usually in a special unit for people who have anorexia and bulimia. Treatment involves more than changing the person's eating habits. Anorexic patients

often need counseling for a year or more so they can work on changing the feelings that are causing their problems with self-esteem. Some anorexic patients are helped by taking medicine that makes them feel less depressed. These medicines are prescribed by a doctor and are used along with counseling.

How can family and friends help?

The more important thing that family and friends can do to help a person who has anorexia is to love them. People who have anorexia feel safe, secure and comfortable with their illness. Their biggest fear is gaining weight, and gaining weight is seen as loss of control. They may deny they have a problem. People who have anorexia will beg and lie to avoid eating and gaining weight, which is like giving up on the illness. Family and friends should not give in to the pleading of the anorexic patient.

Complications

What's wrong with trying to be thin?

It's healthy to watch what you eat and to exercise. What isn't healthy is worrying all the time about your weight and what you eat. People who have eating disorders do harmful things to their bodies because of their obsession about their weight.

If it isn't treated, anorexia can cause the following health problems:

- Stomach problems
- Heart problems
- Irregular periods or no periods
- Fine hair all over the body, including the face
- Dry, scaly skin

If it isn't treated, bulimia can cause the following health problems:

- Stomach problems
- Heart problems
- Kidney problems
- Dental problems (from throwing up stomach acid)
- Dehydration (not enough water in the body)

What are the problems caused by anorexia?

Girls and women who have anorexia may feel cold all the time, and they may get sick often. People who have anorexia are often in a bad mood. They have a hard time concentrating and are always thinking about food. It is not true that anorexics are never hungry. Actually, they are always hungry. Feeling hunger gives them a feeling of control over their lives and their bodies. It makes them feel like they are good at something—they are good at losing weight. People who have severe anorexia may be at risk of death from starvation.

Other Organizations

Mirasol: Recovery From Eating Disorders and Healing Chronic Illness

National Eating Disorders Association

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What treatment is best for me?
- Will I have to be in treatment for the rest of my life?
- What can I do to help my child get better?
- Does my child have an eating disorder?
- Do I need counseling?
- Why do I have an eating disorder?
- Is there a medicine I should take?
- Do we need family counseling?
- Will my child need to be hospitalized?
- If I suspect my child has an eating disorder, what should I do?