

# Eating Disorders: *About More Than Food*

**Has your urge to eat less or more food  
spiraled out of control?**

**Are you overly concerned about your  
outward appearance?**

***If so, you may have an eating disorder.***



National Institute  
of Mental Health

## What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are serious medical illnesses marked by severe disturbances to a person's eating behaviors. Obsessions with food, body weight, and shape may be signs of an eating disorder. These disorders can affect a person's physical and mental health; in some cases, they can be life-threatening. **But eating disorders can be treated.** Learning more about them can help you spot the warning signs and seek treatment early.

**Remember:** Eating disorders are **not** a lifestyle choice. They are biologically-influenced medical illnesses.

### Who is at risk for eating disorders?

Eating disorders can affect people of all ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, body weights, and genders. Although eating disorders often appear during the teen years or young adulthood, they may also develop during childhood or later in life (40 years and older).

**Remember:** People with eating disorders may appear healthy, yet be extremely ill.

The exact cause of eating disorders is not fully understood, but research suggests a combination of genetic, biological, behavioral, psychological, and social factors can raise a person's risk.

## What are the common types of eating disorders?

Common eating disorders include **anorexia nervosa**, **bulimia nervosa**, and **binge-eating disorder**. If you or someone you know experiences the symptoms listed below, it could be a sign of an eating disorder—call a health provider right away for help.

### What is anorexia nervosa?

People with anorexia nervosa avoid food, severely restrict food, or eat very small quantities of only certain foods. Even when they are dangerously underweight, they may see themselves as overweight. They may also weigh themselves repeatedly.

There are two subtypes of anorexia nervosa: a *restrictive* subtype and *binge-purge* subtype.

*Restrictive:* People with the restrictive subtype of anorexia nervosa place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they consume.

*Binge-Purge:* People with the binge-purge subtype of anorexia nervosa also place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they consume. In addition, they may have binge eating and purging behaviors (such as vomiting, use of laxatives and diuretics, etc.).

### Symptoms include:

- ▶ Extremely restricted eating and/or intensive and excessive exercise
- ▶ Extreme thinness (emaciation)
- ▶ A relentless pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy weight
- ▶ Intense fear of gaining weight
- ▶ Distorted body image, a self-esteem that is heavily influenced by perceptions of body weight and shape, or a denial of the seriousness of low body weight

Over time, these symptoms may also develop:

- ▶ Thinning of the bones (osteopenia or osteoporosis)
- ▶ Mild anemia and muscle wasting and weakness

- Brittle hair and nails
- Dry and yellowish skin
- Growth of fine hair all over the body (lanugo)
- Severe constipation
- Low blood pressure, slowed breathing and pulse
- Damage to the structure and function of the heart
- Drop in internal body temperature, causing a person to feel cold all the time
- Lethargy, sluggishness, or feeling tired all the time
- Infertility
- Brain damage
- Multiorgan failure

**Anorexia can be fatal.** Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality (death) rate of any mental disorder. People with anorexia may die from medical conditions and complications associated with starvation; by comparison, people with others eating disorders die of suicide.

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**If you or someone you know is in crisis and needs immediate help,** call the toll-free **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL)** at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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## **What is bulimia nervosa?**

People with bulimia nervosa have recurrent episodes of eating unusually large amounts of food and feeling a lack of control over these episodes. This binge-eating is followed by behaviors that compensate for the overeating, such as forced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives or diuretics, fasting, excessive exercise, or a combination of these behaviors. Unlike those with anorexia nervosa, people with bulimia nervosa may maintain a normal weight or be overweight.

### **Symptoms include:**

- Chronically inflamed and sore throat
- Swollen salivary glands in the neck and jaw area
- Worn tooth enamel and increasingly sensitive and decaying teeth (a result of exposure to stomach acid)
- Acid reflux disorder and other gastrointestinal problems
- Intestinal distress and irritation from laxative abuse
- Severe dehydration from purging
- Electrolyte imbalance (too low or too high levels of sodium, calcium, potassium and other minerals), which can lead to stroke or heart attack

## **What is binge-eating disorder?**

People with binge-eating disorder lose control over their eating. Unlike bulimia nervosa, periods of binge-eating are not followed by purging, excessive exercise, or fasting. As a result, people with binge-eating disorder are often overweight or obese.

### **Symptoms include:**

- Eating unusually large amounts of food in a specific amount of time, such as a 2-hour period
- Eating fast during binge episodes

- Eating even when full or not hungry
- Eating until uncomfortably full
- Eating alone or in secret to avoid embarrassment
- Feeling distressed, ashamed, or guilty about eating
- Frequently dieting, possibly without weight loss

## How are eating disorders treated?

It is important to seek treatment early for eating disorders. People with eating disorders are at higher risk for suicide and medical complications. Some people with eating disorders may also have other mental disorders (such as depression or anxiety) or problems with substance use.

Treatment plans for eating disorders include psychotherapy, medical care and monitoring, nutritional counseling, medications, or a combination of these approaches. Typical treatment goals include restoring adequate nutrition, bringing weight to a healthy level, reducing excessive exercise, and stopping binge-purge and binge-eating behaviors. Complete recovery is possible.

Specific forms of psychotherapy (or “talk therapy”) and cognitive behavioral approaches can be effective for treating specific eating disorders. For more about psychotherapies, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/psychotherapies/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/psychotherapies/index.shtml).

Research also suggests that medications may help treat some eating disorders and co-occurring anxiety or depression related to eating disorders. Information about medications changes frequently, so talk to your health care professional and check the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website** for the latest warnings, patient medication guides, or newly approved medications.

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### How Do I Find Treatment?

The NIMH is a federal research agency and cannot provide medical advice or practitioner referrals. However, there are tools and resources available at [www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp) that may help you find a provider or treatment.

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## How is NIMH addressing eating disorders?

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is conducting and supporting research that could help find new and improved ways to diagnose and treat eating disorders. For example, the NIMH Eating Disorders Research Program supports research on the causes, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment at medical institutions across the country. It also supports studies that can help explain the risk factors that cause eating disorders to start or reoccur. The program’s studies on treatment help move basic science findings from the lab bench to a patient’s bedside.

### What are some examples of NIMH research?

Eating disorders tend to run in families, so one example of NIMH-supported research involves the study of human genetics. Researchers are working to identify DNA variations that are linked to an increased risk of developing eating disorders. This research may help develop strategies for early detection.

Brain imaging studies are also providing a better understanding of eating disorders. For example, researchers have found differences in patterns of brain neurocircuitry and activity in people with eating disorders in comparison with healthy people. This research may lead to new or improved ways to diagnose and treat eating disorders.

## How can I participate in research?

Clinical research is medical research that involves people like you. People volunteer to participate in carefully conducted investigations that ultimately uncover better ways to treat, prevent, diagnose, and understand human disease. Clinical research includes clinical research trials that test new treatments and therapies as well as long-term natural history studies, which provide valuable information about how disease and health progress.

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**Please Note:** Decisions about participating in a clinical trial and determining which ones are right for you are best made in collaboration with your licensed health professional.

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## How do I find a clinical trial?

Researchers at NIMH conduct clinical trials on numerous areas of study, including cognition, genetics, epidemiology, and psychiatry. These clinical trials take place at the NIH Clinical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and may require regular visits. After an initial phone interview, you will come to an appointment at the clinic and meet with a clinician. Visit the **NIMH Clinical Trials — Participants** or **Join a Study** pages for more information on participating in clinical trials.

To find a clinical trial near you, you can visit [www.ClinicalTrials.gov](http://www.ClinicalTrials.gov). This website is a searchable registry and results database of federally and privately supported clinical trials conducted in the United States and around the world. ClinicalTrials.gov gives you information about a trial's purpose, who may participate, locations, and phone numbers for more details. This information should be used in conjunction with advice from health professionals.

## Where Can I Find Help?

### Mental Health Treatment Locator

For more information, resources, and research on mental illnesses, visit the NIMH website at [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov). The National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus website ([medlineplus.gov/](http://medlineplus.gov/)) also has information on a wide variety of mental disorders.

For general information on mental health and to locate treatment services, call the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Treatment Referral Helpline** at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). SAMHSA also has a Behavioral Health Treatment Locator on its website ([findtreatment.samhsa.gov](http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov)) that can be searched by location.

### Questions to Ask Your Doctor

Asking questions and providing information to your doctor or health care provider can improve your care. Talking with your doctor builds trust and leads to better results, quality, safety, and satisfaction. Visit the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality website for tips at [www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers](http://www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers).

More information about finding a health care provider or treatment for mental disorders is available on our Finding Help for Mental Illness webpage, available at [www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp).

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## Where Can I Find More Information?

To learn more about eating disorders, visit:

**MedlinePlus (National Library of Medicine) (En Español)**

For information on clinical trials, visit:

**ClinicalTrials.gov**

For more information on conditions that affect mental health, resources, and research, go to **MentalHealth.gov**, the **NIMH website**, or contact us at:

### **National Institute of Mental Health**

Office of Science Policy, Planning, and Communications

Science Writing, Press, and Dissemination Branch

6001 Executive Boulevard

Room 6200, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

Phone: 301-443-4513 or 1-866-615-NIMH (6464) toll-free

TTY: 301-443-8431 or 1-866-415-8051 toll-free

FAX: 301-443-4279

Email: [nimhinfo@nih.gov](mailto:nimhinfo@nih.gov)

Website: [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)



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