



What are eating disorders?

There are three main types of eating disorders: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.

The signs of an eating disorder often start before a person looks unwell, so weight should never be the only consideration.

Anorexia nervosa

A person who experiences anorexia nervosa may refuse to keep their weight at a normal weight for them by restricting the amount of food they eat or exercising much more than usual. They may feel overweight regardless of their actual weight. They may think about their body weight often and use it to measure their self-worth.

Restricting food can affect a person's entire body. Anorexia nervosa can cause heart and kidney problems, low blood iron, bone loss, digestive problems, low heart rate, low blood pressure, and fertility problems in women. As many as 10% of people who experience anorexia die as a result of health problems or suicide.

Bulimia nervosa

Bulimia nervosa involves periods of uncontrollable binge-eating, followed by purging (eliminating food, such as by vomiting or using laxatives). People who experience bulimia nervosa may feel overweight regardless of their actual weight. They may think about their body weight often and use it to measure their self-worth.

Health problems caused by bulimia nervosa may include kidney problems, dehydration, and digestive problems. Vomiting often can damage a person's teeth, mouth, and throat.

Binge-eating disorder

Binge-eating disorder involves periods of over-eating. People who experience binge-eating disorder may feel like they can't control how much they eat, and feel distressed, depressed, or guilty after bingeing. Many people try to keep bingeing a secret. Binge-eating can be a way to cope or find comfort, and it can sometimes develop after dieting. Some people may fast (not eating for a period of time) or diet after periods of binge-eating.

Binge-eating disorder can increase the risk of Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, or weight concerns.

Who does it affect?

Eating disorders can affect anyone, but some people may be at higher risk. People who experience lower self-esteem or poor body image, perfectionism, or difficulties dealing with stress may be more likely to experience an eating disorder. A lack of positive social supports and other important connections may also play a big part. In some cases, eating disorders can go along with other mental illnesses.

Our beliefs around body image are also important. While the media may often portray thinness as an ideal body type, this alone doesn't cause an eating disorder. How we think about those messages and apply them to our lives is what affects our self-esteem and self-worth.

What can I do about it?

You may have a lot of difficult feelings around finding help—it isn't always an easy step to take. Many people who experience an eating disorder are scared to go into treatment because they may believe that they will have to gain weight. Many also feel a lot of shame or guilt around their illness, so the thought of talking about very personal experiences can seem overwhelming. Some people find comfort in their eating behaviours and are scared to find new ways to cope. Restricting food, bingeing, and purging can lead to serious health problems, but eating disorders are treatable and you can recover. A good support team can help you through recovery and teach important skills that last a lifetime.

Treatment for an eating disorder usually involves several different health professionals. Some people may need to spend time in hospital to treat physical health problems.

Counselling and support

Counselling helps people work through problems and develop skills to manage problems in the future. There are different types of counselling, including cognitive-behavioural therapy, dialectical behaviour therapy, and interpersonal therapy. The entire family may take part in counselling, particularly when a young person experiences an eating disorder.

It can be very helpful to connect with support groups. They're an opportunity to share experiences and recovery strategies, find support, and connect with people who understand what you're experiencing. There may also be support groups for family and friends affected by a loved one's eating disorder.

There are many self-help strategies to try at home. Skills like problem-solving, stress management, and relaxation techniques can help everyone cope with challenges or problems in a healthy way. You'll find many different skills like these in counselling, but you can practice them on your own, too. And it's always important to spend time on activities you enjoy and connect with loved ones.

A dietitian or nutritionist can teach eating strategies and eating habits that support your recovery goals. This is also called 'nutritional counselling.'

Medication

While there are no medications specifically for eating disorders, medication may help with the mood problems that often go along with an eating disorder.

Medical care

Eating disorders can cause physical health problems, so you may need regular medical care and check-ups.

How can I help a loved one?

Supporting a loved one who experiences an eating disorder can be very challenging. Many people feel upset or even frightened by their loved one's beliefs, behaviours, or state of well-being. An approach that focuses on support and understanding rather than control is best. Here are some tips to help you support a loved one:

- Remember that eating disorders are a sign of much bigger problems. Avoid focusing on food or eating habits alone.
- Be mindful of your own attitudes and behaviours around food and body image.
- Never force someone to change their eating habits or trick someone into changing.
- Avoid reacting to a loved one's body image talk or trying to reason with statements that seem unrealistic to you.
- If your loved one is an adult, remember that supporting help-seeking is a balance between your own concerns and their right to privacy.
- If your loved one's experiences are affecting other family members, family counselling may be helpful.
- Don't be afraid to set boundaries and seek support for yourself.

Do you need more help?

Contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to learn more about support and resources in your area.

Founded in 1918, The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a national charity that helps maintain and improve mental health for all Canadians. As the nation-wide leader and champion for mental health, CMHA helps people access the community resources they need to build resilience and support recovery from mental illness.