

Eating Disorders:

What You Need to Know



National Institute
of Mental Health

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are serious illnesses marked by severe disturbances to one's eating behaviors. Although many people may be concerned about their health, weight, or appearance from time to time, some people become fixated or obsessed with weight loss, body weight or shape, and controlling their food intake. These may be signs of an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are not a choice. These disorders can adversely affect a person's physical and mental health, and in some cases, they can be life-threatening. With treatment, however, people can recover from eating disorders.

Who is at risk for eating disorders?

Eating disorders can affect people of all ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, body weights, and sexes. Even people who appear healthy can have eating disorders and be extremely ill. People with eating disorders can be underweight, average weight, or overweight.

The exact cause of eating disorders is not fully understood. 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 types of eating disorders include:

- **Anorexia nervosa:** People with anorexia nervosa severely avoid or restrict food intake due to a distorted self-image or an intense fear of gaining weight. Even when dangerously underweight, they may see themselves as overweight. Some people with anorexia nervosa may also have binge eating and purging episodes.
- **Binge-eating disorder:** People with binge-eating disorder regularly lose control of their eating and eat unusually large amounts of food. People with binge-eating disorder are often overweight or obese.
- **Bulimia nervosa:** People with bulimia nervosa regularly binge eat and then engage in unhealthy behaviors to prevent weight gain, such as forced vomiting or the use of laxatives. People with bulimia nervosa may maintain an average weight or be overweight.
- **Avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID):** People with ARFID limit the amount and variety of food they eat due to their anxiety or fear of the consequences of eating (such as choking or vomiting) or dislike of a food's characteristics (such as its appearance or texture). People with ARFID are frequently underweight.

People exhibiting any combination of these symptoms may have an eating disorder and should talk to a health care provider.

What are the signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa?

Signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa include:	Over time, anorexia nervosa can lead to numerous serious health consequences, including:
● Extremely restricted eating ● Intense and excessive exercise ● Extreme thinness (emaciation) ● A relentless pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a healthy weight ● Intense fear of gaining weight ● Distorted body image or self-image ● Denial of the seriousness of low body weight	● Thinning of the bones (osteopenia or osteoporosis) ● Mild anemia ● Muscle wasting and weakness ● Delayed puberty ● Severe constipation ● Low blood pressure ● Slowed breathing and pulse ● Damage to the structure and function of the heart ● Feeling tired all the time ● Infertility ● Brain damage ● Multiple organ failure

Anorexia nervosa can be fatal. It has an extremely high death rate compared with other mental disorders. People with anorexia nervosa are at risk of dying from medical complications associated with starvation. Suicide is a leading cause of death for people diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

If you or someone you know is struggling or having thoughts of suicide, call or text the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at **988** or chat at **988lifeline.org**. In life-threatening situations, call **911**.



What are the signs and symptoms of binge-eating disorder?

Signs and symptoms of binge-eating disorder include:	Over time, binge eating can lead to serious health consequences, including:
• Eating unusually large amounts of food in a short amount of time, for example, within two hours • Eating rapidly 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 • Dieting frequently, possibly without weight loss	• Obesity • Type 2 diabetes • Cardiovascular problems • Sleep problems • Gastrointestinal symptoms (such as acid reflux, bloating, and diarrhea)



What are the signs and symptoms of bulimia nervosa?

The signs and symptoms of bulimia nervosa include the same signs and symptoms as binge eating. They also include the following, which aim to get rid of food after binge eating:	Over time, bulimia nervosa can lead to serious health consequences, including:
● Throwing up ● Taking laxatives ● Exercising excessively ● Fasting	● Chronically inflamed and sore throat ● Swollen salivary glands in the neck and jaw area ● Worn tooth enamel and increasingly sensitive and decaying teeth ● Acid reflux disorder and other gastrointestinal problems ● Intestinal distress and irritation ● Severe dehydration ● Electrolyte imbalance

What are the signs and symptoms of avoidant restrictive food intake disorder?

Signs and symptoms of ARFID include:	Over time, ARFID can lead to serious health consequences, including:
● Severe restriction of types or amount of food eaten ● Lack of appetite or interest in food ● Dramatic weight loss ● Upset stomach, abdominal pain, or other gastrointestinal issues with no other known cause ● Limited range of preferred foods that becomes even more limited (“picky eating” that gets progressively worse)	● Unhealthy weight loss ● Malnutrition ● Changes to physical growth ● Functional impairments associated with academic performance, work, and relationships

What mental illnesses can co-occur with eating disorders?

People with eating disorders are at risk for co-occurring mental illnesses, which most often include depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. People with eating disorders are also at a higher risk for suicide. It's critical to treat any co-occurring conditions as part of the treatment plan.

How are eating disorders treated?

Eating disorders can be treated successfully. Early detection and treatment are important for recovery. Treatment plans for eating disorders include:

- **Individual, group, or family psychotherapy** to identify and change troubling emotions, thoughts, and behaviors about food. For general information about psychotherapies, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/psychotherapies.
- **Medical care and monitoring** to treat the health consequences of an eating disorder and monitor overall well-being.
- **Nutritional counseling** to help people eat well and reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- **Medication** to treat the symptoms of some eating disorders, including bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder, and to reduce symptoms of co-occurring anxiety or depression. There are currently no medications approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat the symptoms of anorexia nervosa or ARFID.

Some people with a severe eating disorder may need to be in a hospital or residential treatment program.

A person's family can play a crucial role in treatment. They can encourage a family member with eating or body image issues to seek help and can provide support during treatment. Research suggests that family-based treatment can improve eating disorder treatment outcomes, particularly for adolescents.



How can I find help?

If you have concerns about your eating behavior or mental health, talk to a primary care provider. They can refer you to a qualified mental health professional, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or clinical social worker, who can help you figure out the next steps. Find tips for talking with a health care provider about your mental health at www.nimh.nih.gov/talkingtips.

You can learn more about getting help at www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides information about finding support at <https://findsupport.gov> and locating mental health services in your area at <https://findtreatment.gov>.

What are clinical trials and why are they important?

Clinical trials are research studies that look at ways to prevent, detect, or treat diseases and conditions. These studies help show whether a treatment is safe and effective in people. Some people join clinical trials to help doctors and researchers learn more about a disease and improve health care. Other people, such as those with health conditions, join to try treatments that aren't widely available.

NIMH supports clinical trials across the United States. Talk to a health care provider about clinical trials and whether one is right for you. For more information, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/clinicaltrials.



For more information

Learn more at www.nimh.nih.gov/health. For information about various health topics, visit the National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus resource at <https://medlineplus.gov>.

Contact us

National Institute of Mental Health

Office of Science Policy, Planning, and Communications

6001 Executive Boulevard, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

Phone: 1-866-615-6464

Email: nimhinfo@nih.gov

Website: www.nimh.nih.gov

En español: www.nimh.nih.gov/espanol

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