Understanding eating disorders

What types of eating disorders are there?
When people talk about eating disorders, they think of anorexia and bulimia. But there is now growing awareness that some people suffer a combination of eating disorders and behaviours towards eating. Everyone experiences their eating disorder in their own way. Whatever form it takes, an eating disorder can be beaten. Understanding your eating disorder and knowing where you can go to find out more information is a good first step towards beating an eating disorder.

What is anorexia?
Anorexia stems from low self-esteem and an inability to cope safely with worries and problems. It involves restricting the amount of food consumed by skipping meals and cutting down the types and amounts of food eaten; some people over-exercise as well. Many sufferers believe that if they lose weight their life will be happier, people will like them more, they will be more successful or even perhaps noticed less.

I thought about food and calories all the time. I tried to avoid foods containing lots of fat or carbohydrates and only had ‘safe’ foods which I felt were OK to eat.” Anon

Some of the symptoms of anorexia are:

- Physical
  - severe weight loss
  - difficulty sleeping and fatigue
  - dizziness
  - stomach pains
  - constipation
  - feeling cold
  - growth of soft, fine hair all over the body
  - disrupted periods
  - poor skin
  - hair loss

- Behaviour
  - excessive exercising
  - ritual or obsessive behaviours
  - being secretive
  - lying about eating
  - trying to please everyone alternating with being very angry
  - cooking or preparing food for other people
  - wearing baggy clothes

- Thinking and feeling
  - feeling fat when really underweight
  - getting irritable and moody
  - setting high standards and being a perfectionist
  - shutting yourself off from the world
  - thinking things are either right or wrong, there is no in-between
  - having difficulty concentrating

What is bulimia?
Bulimia is also linked with low self-esteem, emotional problems and stress. Bulimics may constantly think about calories, dieting and ways of getting rid of the food they’ve eaten. Bulimia is actually more common than anorexia, but is more hidden because bulimics usually remain at an average or just over average body weight. Bulimia can go unnoticed for a long time, although sufferers may feel ill and very unhappy.

If you have bulimia you become involved in a cycle of eating large amounts of food, making yourself sick, cutting down or starving for a few days or trying to find other ways to make up for the food you’ve eaten. Starving causes you to become so hungry that you eat large quantities of food because your body is craving nourishment. Some people do not vomit but take laxatives or diuretics; both behaviours may be described as ‘purging’ by medical professionals. Taking laxatives or diuretics is particularly dangerous.

Some of the symptoms of bulimia are:

- Physical
  - sore throat, bad breath and mouth infections
  - stomach pains
  - disrupted periods
  - dry or poor skin
  - difficulty sleeping
  - constipation
  - puffy cheeks
  - dehydration
  - fainting
  - kidney and bowel problems

- Behaviour
  - eating large quantities of food
  - being sick after meals or binges
  - taking laxatives or diet pills
  - being secretive and lying about food

- Thinking and feeling
  - feeling emotional and depressed
  - feeling out of control
  - mood swings
  - obsessed with dieting

“I used eating as a way of keeping control, I didn’t have much confidence but I felt that if I could control what I ate I could cope with everything.” Anon

Hannah Jones from BBC One’s Fix My Fat Head

Based on work originally produced by b-eat
What is binge eating disorder and compulsive overeating?

If you binge eat, you may eat large amounts of food in a short period of time. Sufferers may focus on eating one particular food or select food randomly. The pattern of eating in a binge is very different from sitting down and having a meal. There may be a feeling of lack of control during these binges, but unlike someone with bulimia, the binge is not followed by a need to get rid of the food. Bingers may eat much more quickly, eat until they are uncomfortably full, eat large amounts of food when not hungry or eat alone. The reasons for binge eating are very similar to those for bulimia.

Compulsive overeating involves ‘picking’ at food all day. There may be different reasons for this, but as with other eating disorders, food and eating is used as a way of dealing with difficult feelings. If you compulsively overeat or binge eat, you may feel depressed or inadequate because you cannot control your eating, which can lead to further eating and weight gain.

Some of the effects of binge eating are:

**Physical**
- weight gain
- stomach pains
- disrupted periods
- poor or spotty skin
- difficulty sleeping
- constipation

**Behaviour**
- eating large quantities of food
- being secretive and lying about how much you’ve eaten

**Thinking and feeling**
- feeling emotional and depressed
- feeling out of control
- mood swings
- obsessed with dieting

Who do eating disorders affect and when?

Anyone can develop an eating disorder, regardless of age, sex, cultural or racial background, however, the people most likely to be affected tend to be young women, particularly between the ages of 15–25. It is not unusual, however, for an eating disorder to appear in middle age. Research has shown that genetics can play a crucial part in whether or not you develop an eating disorder. In situations where there are high academic expectations, family issues or social pressures, you may focus on food and eating as a way of coping with these stresses.

“Sometimes I just feel that I’ve lost all control, that nobody in the world can feel as I do after a binge, then I just start worrying about my weight. It never goes away.” Anon

Traumatic events can sometimes trigger an eating disorder: bereavement; being bullied or abused; an upheaval in the family (such as divorce); long-term illness.

Do men get eating disorders?

Many people assume that eating disorders only affect teenage girls. This is not true. Research shows about a quarter of people affected by an eating disorder at school age are boys. Amongst adults, at least 10% of people diagnosed as having an eating disorder are male. However, there are probably many more undiagnosed cases because there is less chance of the condition being recognised in male sufferers. Many males find it hard to ask for help especially when the doctor or counsellor does not recognise their symptoms.

Where can I go for further help?

**Anorexia and Bulimia Care**
Providing encouragement, advice and support for all involved (sufferers and family members) to help make full recovery possible.

Tel (Sufferer Support Line): 01934 710679
Tel (Parent/Carer Help Line): 01934 710645
www.anorexiabulimiacare.co.uk

**Samaritans**
Samaritans provides confidential non-judgmental emotional support. Lines are open 24 hours a day. Calls are charged at the local rate.

Tel (UK): 08457 909090
Tel (ROI): 1850 60 90 90
www.samaritans.org

**B-eat**
Offers information and support through its national helplines, support groups, and comprehensive website.

Tel: 08456 341 414
www.b-eat.co.uk

All content is provided for general information only, and should not be treated as a substitute for the medical advice of your own doctor or any other health care professional. The BBC is not responsible or liable for any diagnosis made by a user based on the content of this factsheet. The BBC is not liable for the contents of any external internet sites listed, nor does it endorse any commercial product or service mentioned or advised on any of the sites. Always consult your own GP if you’re in any way concerned about your health.