

Eating disorders are not just about eating too much or too little. Eating disorders affect the mind and the body. It is about food, body shape, body image, exercising, and dieting as well as other life factors. There are a number of eating disorders, of which anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are probably the types most people are familiar with.

These conditions affect males and females and the impact of these conditions on a young person's life can be quite serious and at times can even become life-threatening. If it is identified and treated effectively early however, positive outcomes are more likely.

What to look for

Concerns about weight, appearance and poor eating habits are very common in today's society.

Young people may go through periods of binge eating or dieting. At times however, concerns about weight, appearance and inappropriate eating habits such as binge eating or dieting can become excessive and begin to affect a person's health and well-being. This is the stage at which an eating disorder is said to exist. Many young people experiencing an eating disorder do not seek help on their own. Indeed, many will try to minimise or deny their problem and hide their problem from family and friends. Knowing some signs of eating disorders may help.

Signs can include:

- Excessive dieting or overeating
- Thinking and talking about body appearance, weight and food
- Avoidance of social situations involving food
- Becoming irritable and/or withdrawing from friends and family
- Wearing loose fitting clothing to hide weight loss
- Wanting to eat alone
- Playing with food
- Exercising often
- Feeling faint, dizzy and weakness
- Going to the bathroom after meals
- Difficulty concentrating
- Often feeling tired and low

Types of eating disorder

Both anorexia and bulimia involve a preoccupation with body weight and control over eating and food.

People with anorexia control the amount of food that they eat, while people with bulimia tend to feel out of control where food is concerned.

Anorexia

Anorexia nervosa is characterised by a:

- Refusal to eat enough food despite hunger, and refusal to maintain body weight of at least 85% of that expected for age and height
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight
- Distorted perceptions of body image, or undue influence of body weight/shape on self-evaluation,
- Denial of serious weight loss
- For females, a loss of normal menstrual periods or irregular menstrual periods

Young people with anorexia go without food and may exercise excessively. Some may also force themselves to vomit after eating, or use pills to force their weight down.

Bulimia

Bulimia nervosa is characterised by:

- Frequent and reoccurring episodes of binge eating, which involves consumption of large quantities of food (often high in calories, or fatty, carbohydrate or sugar heavy foods), during which the person feels a loss of control
- Frequent and reoccurring attempts to offset the binges and avoid weight gain, through such things as self-induced vomiting, use of pills, fasting, or excessive exercising

Often, a compulsive cycle of binge/purge/exercise/binge becomes established and the person feels out of control. A person with bulimia is usually within a healthy weight range and so their problem may be less obvious.

Complications

Eating disorders can lead to serious physical health issues. Starvation or repeated cycles of binge eating and purging/fasting can lead to major metabolic and other chemical changes in the body and damage to vital organs.

Associated problems

Apart from the physical complications, young people with an eating disorder may have other mental health problems as well. For instance people with eating disorders may also suffer from depression and anxiety.

AWAWARENESS



What can be done if you think someone has a problem?

The first thing to do is let the person know that you are worried and care about them. Even if they deny there is a problem, may get upset and may not want to talk about it, it is worthwhile trying to encourage them to seek professional help. This could include encouraging them to see and talk to a General Practitioner (GP), the school counsellor, a psychologist, or specialist mental health worker. It might be good for you to offer your support, and go with them to the appointment. If they are not ready to do this, don't force it, just try and be there for them as they may wish to open up soon.



DISCUSS

What is eating disorder treatment?

Keeping the person safe is the first priority of treatment. If the weight loss is severe and serious health complications are apparent, then hospitalisation may be required.

Specific treatment for eating disorders consists of developing a good working relationship with the young person, providing them with information and explanation about eating disorders, restoring weight to a normal range, establishing healthy eating and activity regimes, monitoring of physical health, individual counselling and family work, and in certain cases, the use of medication. A team approach is often used.

Advice and referral:

Contact your local GP if you suspect someone has an eating disorder. The GP will assist the young person in making a plan and if medical treatment is necessary. Often, young people are referred to other health professionals for nutritional counselling/advice and/or psychological therapy.

A helpful resource is the Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria – www.eatingdisorders.org.au

Services at Orygen Youth Health Clinical Program

Orygen Youth Health Clinical Program does not have a specialist eating disorders clinic but can offer mental health assistance to some young people aged 15 to 24 (inclusive) who live in western or north western Melbourne who have an eating disorder and other mental health problems.

To make a referral or get some advice contact the **Orygen Youth Health Clinical Program** Triage worker on **1800 888 320** or via the **paging service on 03 9483 4556**.

For children and teenagers under 15 years of age contact RCH Mental Health Service on 1800 445 511.