



What is an Eating Disorder?

While we all worry about food sometimes, overeat at holidays, or skip a meal, people with eating disorders are obsessed with body dissatisfaction. They participate in body altering activities. They often struggle to hide eating patterns they cannot control. Ultimately they require psychological assessment.

Societal and cultural pressures emphasize thinness as a mark of attractiveness and acceptance. We live in a culture that spends billions on diets and where "thin is in." Eating disorders affect 10 to 20 % of teenage girls and young women. Men may also have eating disorders but they occur less frequently.

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are two types of eating disorders that are becoming more common.

Anorexia

An anorexic person has abnormal weight loss from continuous self-starvation or severe self-imposed dieting. They simply will not eat, or eat tiny amounts of low-fat, low-calorie food. They often skip meals. Most anorexics over-exercise to stay thin. There is an extreme fear of gaining weight. If anorexic patients do not seek medical attention they may die due to starvation.

Bulimia

A bulimic individual is one who binges, then purges. Binges occur when a large amount of food is eaten in a small amount of time. Binges satisfy physical hunger, but more importantly, they meet emotional needs. The binge may occur when the person is dealing with uncomfortable feelings such as depression, frustration, or anger.

Binges are often followed by purging. Purging allows the bulimic to get rid of the food that was eaten during the binge. Purging takes the form of self-induced vomiting, the use of diet pills, laxatives or diuretics, restrictive eating, fasting, or excessive exercise.

How to help

If you are concerned about someone who may be experiencing eating disorders, encourage the person in a caring, non-judgmental way, to seek trained professional help. You may also want to consult with a healthcare professional. For more information contact your local health department or the University of Minnesota Extension Service in your county. You can also call Fairview Behavioral Service at 1-800-463-3120. Or visit the [National Institute of Health Web site](#).

Source: Eating Disorders Resource Directory, University of Minnesota Extension Service

For more information on parenting call INFO-U at 612-624-2200 and request a catalog of available topics.

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