

YOUNG MINDS



The voice for young people's mental health and wellbeing

**WORRIED ABOUT
A YOUNG PERSON'S
EATING PROBLEMS?**

PEOPLE'S EATING HABITS VARY BUT
SERIOUS PROBLEMS
WITH EATING CAN HAVE A
DAMAGING
EFFECT
ON PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL
HEALTH

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We all like different foods and need different amounts of food. Younger children often refuse to eat certain foods and teenagers may go through food fads. Most of us have tried out different diets at some time in our lives, whether to slim a little, put on some weight or to improve our health.

These differences are normal, and usually should not be a cause for concern. But some eating problems are more serious. When they persist and affect a young person's normal way of life, they may be diagnosed as eating disorders. The most serious are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, as well as compulsive eating. Eating problems and disorders are more common in girls but becoming common in boys too. People of all backgrounds and ages can suffer.



ANOREXIA

People with anorexia nervosa have an extreme fear of gaining weight; they feel fat, even when they have lost so much weight that it becomes obvious to others. They may starve themselves by only eating tiny quantities of food. They become so preoccupied with their weight and shape, and so distorted in their thinking about food, that it is very difficult for them to accept the need to eat a proper diet. Nevertheless, they remain fascinated with food and often enjoy cooking for others. Sometimes they may pretend to have eaten when they have not. They may exercise vigorously, use laxatives or make themselves sick in order to lose more weight. A girl's periods may stop or never even start.

BULIMIA

People with bulimia nervosa eat large amounts of food in 'binges' and then make themselves sick to get rid of the food. They may also take large amounts of laxatives. They may not look overweight or underweight, and because of this their eating problems are often difficult to detect. Continuous bingeing and vomiting can eventually do serious harm to their bodies. In fact, they have great difficulty in controlling their eating - sometimes strictly dieting, at other times giving way to periods of bingeing.

COMPULSIVE EATING

People who eat compulsively consume much more food than their bodies need over a long period; they use food to comfort or distract themselves. They may become very overweight, which can lead to serious medical problems.



RECOGNISING EATING PROBLEMS

It can be hard for parents and other adults to know if a young person has an eating problem or disorder.

Below are some signs of difficulty which need to be taken seriously:

- Regularly skipping meals and obsessively counting calories.
- Eating only low calorie food or eating less and less.
- Being moody or down.
- Binge eating.
- Showing a keen interest in buying or cooking food for others.
- Wearing very loose clothes to hide the body.
- An obsession with exercise.
- Dramatic weight loss or gain.
- Disappearing from the table directly after meals (in order to make themselves vomit).
- Saying they are unhappy with their body, comparing themselves to others.
- Trying to be perfect.
- Food missing in large amounts from the kitchen.
- Dehydration, poor skin, sleep problems.

Despite these signs, however, many young people may deny that they have a problem. They may try to keep it a secret, and find it difficult to accept that they need help.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP?

Family and friends can do a lot to support a young person with an eating disorder, particularly by talking to them about their feelings and everyday problems. Young people unwilling to accept help through their parents may find it easier to talk to a teacher at school. They may also be able to refer themselves to a psychotherapist or counsellor. Many areas have specialist youth counselling services.

Eating disorders tend to get worse if a young person is not offered help early on. A visit to the GP can help rule out any underlying physical health problems such as food allergies or intolerances and if necessary the GP should be able to refer the young person to a mental health professional specialising in this area. Treatment includes dietary control as well as individual and family therapy, aimed at resolving underlying emotional problems.

If the young person has lost a great deal of weight or other help seems not to work, they may need to spend some time in hospital or a special unit, where treatment can be more closely monitored.

If you would like to discuss your concerns about a young person's eating problem, YoungMinds Parents' Helpline can provide you with further information and advice.



USEFUL CONTACTS

B-eat provide support and information for people with eating disorders and their carers.

Helpline: 0300 123 3355

E: help@b-eat.co.uk

W: www.b-eat.co.uk

B-eat Youthline: 0845 634 7650 (25 yrs & under)
(Mon-Fri 4.30–8.30pm & Saturday 1–4.30pm)

Text service: 07786 20 18 20

E: fyp@b-eat.co.uk

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National Centre for Eating Disorders is a private national service offering telephone counselling, one to one counselling and workshops for people of any age with eating disorders. Runs centres throughout the UK.

Helpline: 0845 838 2040

W: www.eating-disorder.org.uk

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Youth Access provides information advice and counselling services throughout the UK for young people aged 12–25 years.

Information Service: 020 8772 9900

(Mon-Fri, 9.30am–1pm & 2–4.30pm)

W: www.youthaccess.org.uk



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