

Eating Disorders

What are eating disorders?

According to the National Eating Disorders Association, nearly ten million females and one million males suffer from anorexia or bulimia in America. Another twenty-five million suffer from binge eating disorder. While eating disorders may begin with preoccupations with food and weight, they are most often about much more than food. Long-term physical health implications of eating disorders include heart failure, hair loss, kidney damage, serious tooth decay, and osteoporosis.

The link between eating disorders and addiction

Did you know that some 30 to 50 percent of bulimics also abuse alcohol or drugs? While it is possible to abstain from alcohol and other drugs, it's not possible to abstain from food. You may have been diagnosed for concerns related to an eating disorder while you were in treatment. Or maybe you are more concerned about your eating habits now that you've been through treatment. Be aware that once you are in recovery, there is a risk of trading one addiction for another.

What causes eating disorders?

Although no one variable has been found to "cause" an eating disorder, research has shown that certain personality characteristics, genetic disposition, environment, cultural pressures, and biochemistry all play significant roles in the development of these disorders.

What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa, typically called anorexia, is the most severe type of eating disorder. A person with this disorder has an intense fear of gaining weight and restricts food intake.

What are the symptoms of anorexia nervosa?

People suffering from anorexia are in a cycle of self-starvation. The body is denied essential nutrients that it needs to function normally. This disease can cause serious, irreparable damage to vital organs, such as the heart and the brain, and can lead to death. Physical symptoms of anorexia nervosa include

- weight loss of at least 15 percent of original body weight
- tendency for the body to feed upon itself
- poor muscle tone
- chemical or fluid imbalance that can lead to cardiac arrest and death
- electrolyte/hormonal imbalances
- excessive loss of hair (or increased growth of fine hair)
- edema (swelling) and intolerance to cold
- pale conjunctiva and mucous membranes
- in women—absence of at least three consecutive menstrual periods

Psychological symptoms of anorexia nervosa include

- shame-based existence
- need to control
- hidden feelings
- mental and emotional deterioration—the person no longer perceives reality in a normal way
- belief that a thin body is both desirable and powerful
- intense fear of weight gain
- constant feeling of not being good enough
- obsession with physical attractiveness
- depression and irritability

What are the consequences of anorexia nervosa?

Consequences of anorexia nervosa include

- abnormally slow heart rate and low blood pressure, which increase risk of heart failure
- reduction of bone density (osteoporosis), which results in dry, brittle bones
- muscle loss and weakness
- severe dehydration, which can result in kidney failure
- fainting, fatigue, and overall weakness
- dry hair and skin; hair loss
- growth of a downy layer of hair all over the body, including the face, in an effort to keep the body warm

Where can you get help for anorexia nervosa?

The first step toward recovery from anorexia nervosa is to ask for help. Eating disorders are most successfully treated when diagnosed early. The longer abnormal eating behaviors persist, the more difficult it is to overcome the disorder and its effects on the body. First, contact your medical doctor and therapist for specific treatment options.

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)

ANAD can help you find a support group and offers an online chat room, educational materials on treatment, and information on how to find the right therapist.

What is bulimia nervosa?

People suffering from bulimia eat large amounts of food and then try to get rid of the excess calories by fasting; purging (inducing vomiting); abusing laxatives, diuretics, or enemas; or exercising obsessively. This unhealthy behavior is known as bingeing and purging and is often done in secret. A person with bulimia often feels ashamed and tries to hide the behavior.

What are the symptoms of bulimia nervosa?

Physical symptoms of bulimia nervosa include

- in women—irregular menstruation
- dehydration, dry skin, brittle nails and hair
- fainting
- constant thirst
- dizziness
- electrolyte imbalance
- muscle weakness
- muscle cramping
- dental enamel erosion
- enlargement of the salivary glands below and in front of the ears

Psychological symptoms of bulimia nervosa include

- repressed feelings, especially anger
- hypersensitivity to criticism

- strong feelings of powerlessness and depression
- impulsiveness
- self-isolation, difficulty with intimate relationships
- secretiveness
- shame-based existence
- low self-esteem
- obsession with food, weight, physical appearance, control
- strong need for others' approval
- preoccupation with body size

What are the consequences of bulimia nervosa?

Those with bulimia can damage their esophagus and stomach with excessive vomiting. Stomach acids brought up through vomiting can also wear away the protective coating on teeth. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, bulimia can lead to

- electrolyte imbalances that can result in irregular heartbeats and possibly heart failure and death. Purging can cause these imbalances as the body dehydrates and loses potassium, sodium, and chloride.
- gastric rupture during periods of bingeing
- inflammation and possible rupture of the esophagus from frequent vomiting
- tooth decay and staining from stomach acids released during frequent vomiting
- chronic irregular bowel movements and constipation as a result of laxative abuse
- peptic ulcers and pancreatitis

Where can you get help for bulimia nervosa?

The first step toward recovery from bulimia nervosa is to ask for help. Eating disorders are most successfully treated when diagnosed early. The longer abnormal eating behaviors persist, the more difficult it is to overcome the disorder and its effects on the body. Contact your medical doctor and therapist for specific treatment options.

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)

NEDA offers a toll-free live help line and a nationwide list of treatment facilities and support groups searchable by state.

What is binge eating?

Binge eating is similar to bulimia in that it involves consuming excessive amounts of food. But binge eaters do not purge to compensate for the additional food. As a result, many are overweight or obese.

What are the symptoms of binge eating?

Binge eaters tend to be overweight and are at risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Physical symptoms of binge eating include

- gallstones
- arthritis
- circulatory problems
- hormone imbalances
- sleep apnea
- upper respiratory problems
- diabetes
- hypertension
- cardiovascular disease
- breast cancer
- lower life expectancy
- obesity
- stroke
- in women—menstrual irregularity

Psychological symptoms of binge eating include

- lack of awareness of feelings
- passivity
- strong need for others' approval
- low self-esteem
- sense of powerlessness
- depression

- superficial relationships
- difficulty expressing anger or disagreement
- strong need to take care of others at their own expense
- shame-based existence
- self-disgust, depression, or guilt after overeating

What are the consequences of binge eating?

Binge eating disorder often results in many of the same health risks associated with clinical obesity, such as

- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol levels
- heart disease as a result of elevated triglyceride levels
- type 2 diabetes
- gallbladder disease

Where can you get help for binge eating?

The first step toward recovery from binge eating is to ask for help. Eating disorders are most successfully treated when diagnosed early. The longer abnormal eating behaviors persist, the more difficult it is to overcome the disorder and its effects on the body. First, contact your medical doctor and therapist for specific treatment options.

Overeaters Anonymous (OA)

OA is a Twelve Step program of recovery from compulsive overeating. It is not just about weight loss, obesity, or diets. Instead, it addresses physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Their website provides lists of meetings indexed by state, along with lists of online or phone meetings. OA also features a member-written monthly magazine and an online store.

Web resources

There are many resources out there. The websites for the following organizations were chosen for their usefulness and user friendliness.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

SAMHSA is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America's communities. Its website offers access to many publications about eating disorders.

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)

ANAD can help you find a support group and offers an online chat room, educational materials on treatment, and information on how to find the right therapist.

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

NIMH is a U.S. government organization, an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services, dedicated to research and education in the field of mental health. Its website is a great source of information about specific mental health disorders and eating disorders.

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