

# Eating Disorders

## What are they?

Eating disorders are extreme responses to concerns about weight and food. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating are three types of eating disorders. If untreated, eating disorders can result in serious health problems or death.

People develop eating disorders as a result of many factors. Most people with eating disorders share certain traits such as a fear of becoming fat, feelings of not measuring up to other people's expectations or feelings of helplessness. People who suffer from eating disorders may be depressed, have low self esteem or feel they lack control over their lives. Sometimes they feel like they don't fit in or don't belong. Often the problems begin when a person is feeling emotionally challenged such as when dealing with a difficult transition, shock or loss. The most common age eating disorders start is between 14 and 25, but they may begin in children as young as 10.

## Types, Signs and Symptoms

### Anorexia Nervosa

People who have anorexia have an intense fear of gaining weight. They severely limit the amount of food they eat and can become dangerously thin. Anorexia affects both the body and the mind. It may start as dieting, but it gets out of control. People with anorexia think about food, dieting and weight all the time. They develop a distorted body image. Other people comment that they are too thin, but when they look in the mirror, they see a fat person.

#### Signs and Symptoms:

People who have anorexia:

- Weigh much less than is healthy or normal.
- Are very afraid of gaining weight even if they are underweight.
- Think they are overweight even when they are very thin.

Their lives become focused on controlling their weight. They may:

- Think constantly about food, weight and dieting.
- Strictly limit their food intake. For example, they may limit themselves to just a few hundred calories a day or refuse to eat certain foods, such as anything with fat or sugar.
- Exercise a lot, even when they are sick.
- Vomit, use laxatives or use water pills (diuretics) to avoid weight gain.
- Develop odd habits about food, like cutting all their food into tiny pieces or chewing every bite a certain number of times.
- Become secretive. They may pull away from family and friends, make excuses not to eat around other people and lie about their eating habits.

As starvation sets in, they start to develop signs of serious physical problems. For instance, they may:

- Feel weak, tired or faint.
- Have thinning hair, dry skin and brittle nails.



- Stop having menstrual periods.
- Feel cold all the time.
- Have low blood pressure and a slow heartbeat.
- Have purplish skin colour on their arms and legs from poor blood flow.
- Have swollen feet and hands.
- Grow a layer of baby-fine hair all over their body.

### Bulimia Nervosa

People with bulimia eat large amounts of food in a short time (binge), and then they will do something to get rid of the food (purge). They may vomit, exercise too much or use medicines like laxatives. People who have bulimia may binge because food gives them a feeling of comfort, but eating too much makes them feel out of control. After they binge, they feel ashamed, guilty or afraid of gaining weight, and in response to these feelings they purge.

Without treatment, this “binge and purge” cycle can lead to serious, long-term health problems such as bone thinning (osteoporosis), kidney damage or heart problems. Acid in the mouth from vomiting

can cause tooth decay, gum disease and loss of tooth enamel.

#### Signs and Symptoms:

- Concerns about weight, body size and body shape.
- Eating larger than normal amounts of food in a short period of time.
- Going to the bathroom right after meals (water running may indicate an attempt to hide the sound of vomiting).
- Overeating, but not gaining weight.
- Secretive about eating, hiding food or not eating around other people.
- Exercising a lot, even when not feeling well.
- Often talking about dieting, weight and body shape.
- Frequent use of laxatives or diuretics.
- Has teeth marks or calluses on the back of the hands, or swollen cheeks or jaws (caused by self-induced vomiting).
- Experiencing a lack of control during the eating episodes.

### Binge Eating/Compulsive

Binge eating means eating large amounts of food in a short time. A person with binge eating disorder binges regularly for several months. When a person binges, they feel like they can't control their eating and they feel unhappy about it afterward. If a person has a binge eating disorder he or she doesn't vomit or try other ways to get rid of calories. However, he or she may try to limit how much food is eaten between binges. Binge eating disorder is sometimes called compulsive overeating.

#### Signs and Symptoms:

- Eating too much in a short period of time (less than 2 hours) on a regular basis.
- Eating when not hungry, to ease stress or for comfort.
- Eating for emotional reasons, such as being sad, angry, lonely or bored.
- Feeling like they can't stop eating.
- Eating faster than normal when they binge.
- Eating so much that they feel painfully full.

- Feeling unhappy, upset, guilty or depressed after they binge.
- Eating alone because they are embarrassed about how much they eat.
- Holding the belief that food is their only friend.
- Frequently being out of breath after relatively light activities.
- High blood pressure and/or cholesterol.
- Leg and joint pain.
- Decreased mobility due to weight gain.
- Mood swings, depression or fatigue.
- Insomnia or poor sleeping habits.

## What to do...

It can be very scary to realize that someone you care about has an eating disorder. If you think a friend or loved one has an eating disorder, you can help.

If caught early, most of these disorders can be reversed. However, detecting eating disorders in the early stages—generally within the first year of developing symptoms—can be difficult, as secrecy and denial are barriers to getting help.

- Talk to the person. Tell them what you are worried about.
- Encourage them to talk to someone who can help, like a doctor or counsellor. Offer to go with them.
- Tell someone who can make a difference—like a parent, teacher, counsellor or doctor. The sooner your friend or loved one gets help, the sooner he or she will be healthy again.
- Be non-judgmental.
- Avoid arguments and getting angry.
- Be calm, but assertive.

### Sources:

- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)
- Saskatchewan HealthLine Online
- webmd.com

### Helpful websites:

- Saskatchewan HealthLine Online:  
<http://www.healthlineonline.ca>  
Search this website for information regarding eating disorders.
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Health:  
<http://www.health.gov.sk.ca/eating-disorders>
- National Eating Disorder Information Centre:  
<http://www.nedic.ca/>