



# Patient education: Eating disorders (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What are eating disorders?

These are problems with a person's eating habits and how they think about food and their body. Eating disorders affect both physical and mental health.

There are different eating disorders. They include:

- Anorexia nervosa – This makes people want to weigh less than is healthy. They eat too little or exercise too much. Sometimes, they also do other things, like make themselves vomit.
- Bulimia nervosa – People with bulimia have episodes of overeating, called "binges." After overeating, people then use unhealthy behaviors, like vomiting, to get rid of the food and avoid gaining weight. These behaviors are called "purges."
- Binge eating disorder – This involves regular episodes of overeating. People with binge eating disorder do not purge, skip meals, or exercise too much.
- Specified feeding or eating disorder – This is a term doctors use for eating problems that do not exactly match any of the above disorders. For example, a person might have all the behaviors of anorexia, but not be underweight. Or they might have episodes of overeating, but not often enough to be diagnosed with binge eating disorder.
- Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder ("ARFID") – People with this disorder only eat a small number of specific foods. Because of this, they have trouble getting enough nutrition. This is more severe than picky eating, which is common in children. People with ARFID do not limit their eating because they are worried about gaining weight. They might have a low appetite, have trouble with the textures of certain foods, or be very worried about choking or vomiting.
- Pica – This is a disorder that involves eating non-food items. People with pica might eat cloth, dirt, clay, gum, hair, paper, or other things.

- Rumination disorder – People with this disorder "regurgitate" food from their stomach before it is digested. Then, they chew the food again and swallow it or spit it out. Regurgitation is different from vomiting, and happens without the person trying. These episodes happen soon after eating.

Sometimes, a person will have 1 eating disorder, then develop a different one.

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## **What causes eating disorders?**

It's complicated. Experts think that several different things affect a person's risk. These include:

- Environment – Often, a person develops an eating disorder because they feel pressure to be thinner. But other things also increase a person's risk. Examples include physical or sexual abuse or being mistreated as a child.
- Genetics – For example, some eating disorders can run in families.
- Biology – Some people with eating disorders have changes in the brain that can be seen on a brain scan.

People with eating disorders often have other conditions, too, such as:

- Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Problems with alcohol or drug use
  - Other mental health disorders
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## **How are eating disorders diagnosed?**

The doctor will ask questions, do an exam, and measure the person's height and weight. Based on the person's behaviors and symptoms, doctors can often diagnose a specific disorder.

Doctors will also do lab tests and other tests. These can help check for other conditions that might be causing a person's symptoms. They can also check for problems that can happen when a person has an eating disorder.

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## **How are eating disorders treated?**

It depends on the disorder. In general, treatment might include:

- Psychotherapy – This involves meeting with a therapist to talk about feelings, thoughts, and life. There are different types of psychotherapy.
- Working with a dietitian – This is an expert on food and eating. They can help people change their eating habits and get to a healthy weight. A doctor will follow the person's weight and health closely.
- Medicines – Sometimes, medicines are used to help treat an eating disorder.

Some people with an eating disorder can be treated at home. Others need to be treated in the hospital. It depends on the person's weight, symptoms, and health problems. Treatment can be hard work, and it can take a long time. A complete recovery can take years.

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## **What problems can happen with eating disorders?**

Eating disorders can lead to many different health problems. The problems depend on the disorder and how severe it is. Examples include:

- Not getting enough nutrients
  - Problems growing normally
  - Heart problems
  - Irregular periods
  - Low blood sugar
  - Damage to the mouth, teeth, or esophagus
  - Problems with digestion
  - Dehydration
  - Trouble thinking clearly
  - Seizures
  - Low energy or weakness
  - Weak bones
  - Problems with the hair, skin, and nails
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## **What should I do if I am worried about an eating disorder?**

If you think that you or someone else might have an eating disorder, see a doctor or nurse. They can get you the help you need.

Signs that a person could have an eating disorder include:

- Skipping meals, or eating a very limited diet
- Believing that they are fat even though they are a healthy weight or underweight
- Losing a lot of weight in a short time
- Exercising very frequently or heavily
- Overeating frequently, or making themselves vomit
- Thinking constantly about food and their appearance

Some people with an eating disorder also have depression or anxiety. **If you are thinking of hurting yourself, or worried about someone else, call the doctor or nurse right away or go to the hospital.** In the US, you can also call or text **988** to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Anorexia nervosa \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Bulimia nervosa \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Malnutrition \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Healthy eating for adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Depression in children and teens \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Generalized anxiety disorder \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Healthy eating for teens \(The Basics\)](#)

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