

EATING DISORDERS

Eating, primarily, meets basic biological needs; we eat to continue to live. Yet, there have been great changes in eating patterns over the last few decades; food choices and behavioral norms involved in eating are now stimulated by a multitude of influences that seem to predominate the basic biological needs. An eating disorder, which affects people both physically and mentally, is an illness that is caused by a complex interaction of these biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Eating disorders can cause severe medical complications and even lead to death.

Risk Factors

Body image distortions. Having unhealthy perceptions of own body image, showing an intense interest in the body, and developing negative perceptions about specific body parts or exaggerated perceptions of unimportant defects.

Cultural norms. Living in a culture that glorifies thinness and idealizes ultra-thin body types as desirable, while encouraging diets and exercises meant to change body shape; or alternatively in a society holding values that prize a robust body and appetite.

The “peer” effect. Discussions about body image issues among friends and negative comments and attitude about other's or their own bodies, which stimulate an interest in the idealized body shape and place value on obtaining the “perfect” body.

Major life changes. Dealing with a stressful life

change such as moving into a new house or changing school.

Individual susceptibility. Biological and genetic susceptibility to eating disorders.

External influences. Influence of social norms/societal attitudes toward individual's eating behavior.

Signs and Symptoms

- Excessive concern with weight
- Extreme preoccupation with food, calories, weight, body fat percentage, and diets
- Denial of hunger
- Exercising obsessively
- Frequent self-weighing and excessive concern about body-weight proportions
- Excessive self-criticism of body shape and size
- Storing or throwing away food
- Social withdrawal
- Weight loss and frequent fluctuations in weight
- Fatigue
- Hair loss
- Emotional fluctuations
- Eating excessive amounts of food

Types

Anorexia Nervosa: People with anorexia nervosa usually experience an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat. Anorexic patients refuse



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to maintain a body weight which is consistent with their body frame, age, and height, even though they are below their ideal body weight. As a consequence of having distorted perception of their body size or shape, they might be convinced that they are overweight even when they are bone-thin, and may feel uncomfortable with parts of their body. They weigh themselves frequently to control their body, take body measurements, or constantly look in the mirror and criticize their own body.

Anorexia nervosa can increase the risk for serious problems such as anemia, water-electrolyte imbalance, slow heartbeat or abnormal heart rhythms, sexual function decline due to a decrease in estrogen (female sex hormones) and testosterone (a male hormone) levels.

Bulimia Nervosa: An eating disorder that is characterized by the cycle of “binge-eating and purging”, in other words, the frequent episodes of excessive eating followed by extreme dieting. In bulimia's binge-eating cycle, people lose control over how much they eat, and they binge. They are unable to stop eating. Periods of binge eating are followed by recurrent behavior that compensates for the overeating such as self-induced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives, diuretics, enemas, diet pills, fasting, or a combination of these behaviors to prevent weight gain, eating almost nothing, or over-exercising.

Women suffering from bulimia nervosa often have irregular menstrual cycles. Some bulimic

patients may experience low blood pressure and slow heartbeat, water-salt imbalance resulting from vomiting, esophageal damage, salivary gland enlargement, and tooth decay.

Binge-Eating Disorder: Binge-eating disorder is characterized by compulsive overeating in which people consume huge amounts of food that is larger than most people would eat in a similar period of time under similar circumstances. People with binge-eating disorder eat until they are physically uncomfortable and nauseated due to the amount of food consumed even when they are not physically hungry. They often try to hide their symptoms and eat in secret since they are embarrassed and ashamed of their eating habits, and they feel guilty or depressed after overeating.

Heart attack, high blood pressure, gout, sleep apnea, deposition of fat in the liver, social withdrawal, and depression are among the effects of binge eating disorder.

Diagnosis and Treatment

- Eating disorders is an umbrella term, covering anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder. These disorders are serious illnesses that can have life-threatening consequences, and can even lead to death under certain conditions, and therefore, necessitates treatment.
- If you suspect that you have an eating

disorder, contact a friend you trust, talk to a family member, or inform a faculty member.

- If you have abnormal eating patterns that make you, your circle of friends, and your family feel anxious, and that affect your personal, social, and academic life negatively, seek professional help immediately. It is crucial that you contact a doctor, psychological counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist, dieting specialist, etc. working at the campus, or medical care providers in your area who are familiar with the treatment of eating disorders.

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