

Eating Disorders

What are eating disorders?

You're on your way back from office in the evening and your mind wanders, and soon enough you're thinking about dinner. What do I want to eat? Do I feel like cooking or ordering in? Would Chinese food fit into my diet plan? Food is central to our lives. We all have different tastes in food and different eating habits. We also change our preferences from time to time, go on diets and give in to cravings. These are all normal tendencies when it comes to thinking about food.

For some people, the thought process goes beyond this; they become obsessed with food, weight and body image issues. This causes them to drastically change their eating habits; they may begin to eat extremely small or extremely large portions of food on a regular basis. They may even stop eating for a significant period of time (this does not include people who fast for religious or cultural reasons). Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that can cause significant damage to your health. However, they are completely treatable and the sooner one reaches for help, the higher the chances of recovery.

Some of the common symptoms of eating disorders are:

Behavioral signs:

- The person appears to be fasting regularly and always seems to be counting calories.
- They avoid meals with others, saying they have eaten even when they haven't. Sometimes they hide the uneaten food to eat privately.
- They visit the bathroom frequently, usually during or immediately after meals. This could be to purge or use the toilet in an attempt to rid their body of the food they have just consumed.
- They check their weight multiple times a day; they also repeatedly observe themselves in the mirror.
- The person may become obsessed with exercise so much so that they may go out for a run even when it's pouring or when they're unwell.

Physical signs:

- There is a rapid loss of weight or frequent changes in weight.
- The person feels tired all the time and doesn't sleep well. They feel lethargic and are unable to complete day-to-day tasks.
- They are extremely sensitive towards cold; they often feel cold in warm environments as well.
- The person may feel faint or dizzy often.
- Women may experience disturbances in their menstrual cycle; sometimes they may stop completely.

Psychological signs:

- The person has a fear of putting on weight.
- They become anxious around food.
- Their self-image is highly distorted and they are unable to recognize that they have a healthy weight.
- Depression and anxiety are common among people who suffer from eating disorders.

It is important to remember that dieting and watching what you eat are perfectly normal behaviors. Being on a strict diet does not necessarily mean that the person is suffering from an eating disorder. When a person suffers from an eating disorder, their relationship with food or their body image becomes irrational. For instance, the diet itself becomes an obsession while the reason for the diet becomes secondary, or is lost completely. Another example would be of a person who is visibly underweight and still believes they need to lose weight.

What causes eating disorders?

There is no single factor because of which a person develops an eating disorder, the reasons are usually complex. Eating disorders can result from a variety of psychological, social and behavioral influences. Some of these factors are:

- **Psychological factors:** If you suffer from anxiety, depression or stress, things might seem out of your control and you may use emotional overeating or excessive exercise as a coping mechanism because you believe these are things you *can* control.
- **Social factors:** Media and society often inflate the importance of one's physical attributes and appearance: *thin is beautiful*, for instance. Constant exposure to such pressures can lead to low self-esteem. In an attempt to overcome this feeling you may start to starve yourself or exercise excessively.
- **Behavioral factors:** People who display certain personality traits may be more susceptible to developing an eating disorder. People who show obsessive behavior, or those who are perfectionists and are extremely critical of themselves, are known to be more vulnerable.
- **Life events:** People who have been bullied or teased about their weight, or have history of physical or sexual abuse, may develop an eating disorder while trying to cope with their stress. Other stressful events such as the loss of a loved one, failure at school or at work, can also be a factor.

What are the different types of eating disorders?

The most common eating disorders are:

- **Anorexia Nervosa:** People suffering from anorexia constantly starve themselves and have an intense fear of gaining weight. They believe they are overweight even when they are severely underweight. Their self-esteem is linked to their body image, and this distorted body image causes very low self-esteem.

- **Bulimia Nervosa:** People suffering from bulimia go through episodes of binge-eating, which are followed by purging (forceful vomiting), excessive exercise or use of laxatives and diuretics, or long fasting periods to get rid of the weight gained. They do this because their self-esteem is strongly linked to their feelings of control over food.
- **Binge-eating disorder:** People with this disorder have frequent episodes of binge-eating in which they feel out of control. They do not try to purge or lose the weight but have a strong sense of shame associated with their eating habit. This may lead to them eating alone to hide the habit, sometimes even if they aren't really hungry.
- **Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS):** People with EDNOS suffer some symptoms of the above disorders but do not fit all the criteria to be diagnosed with anorexia, bulimia or binge-eating disorder. For instance someone suffering from **atypical anorexia** may be avoiding food for a long period of time but may not be severely underweight. Another example would be of a person who purges after eating even small amounts of food while maintaining a healthy weight.

Getting treatment for eating disorders

Eating disorders are complex problems that affect the mind and also have severely damaging effects on your physical health. However, with proper treatment, a complete recovery is possible. The earlier you seek help for an eating disorder, the greater are your chances of making a full recovery.

Treatment is usually carried out by a team of professionals: to treat your physical health, your mental health, and to help with your nutrition and help you cultivate better dietary practices. Depending on the severity of your problem, you may or may not require hospitalization. The first step in treatment is to stabilize your condition and ensure there are no serious threats to your health.

The next concern is to ensure that you are at a healthy weight. You will be helped with your nutrition and encouraged to adopt better eating habits to sustain good health. Counseling and therapy are essential for your recovery; it will help you overcome your fear of weight and develop healthy habits regarding your food, weight and body image.