

# YOUNG MiNDS



## Eating problems and eating disorders

Your guide to the signs, symptoms  
and where to find help



**1 in 12 teenagers in the  
UK suffer from eating  
problems.**



# Eating problems can be really tough - but help is available

Eating problems can take a number of different forms from anorexia and bulimia to overeating and binge eating.

They can start as a result of trauma or another mental health condition as well as wishing to achieve an unrealistic body image.

They can be dangerous and can have serious health implications if your weight drops too low or rises too high.

In this leaflet, you'll find information on various eating disorders as well as help on where to get support to help you through it.

# What is an eating problem?

An eating problem is when your eating habits become unhealthy such as you're eating too much or eating too little.

As your body changes in your teens, it can be a scary time. That's totally normal and will pass with time.

Many people try dieting for the first time in their teens, but when your habits become unhealthy, putting your physical or mental health at risk, it becomes a problem.

It is also becoming more common for younger children to have eating disorders, but whatever age you are, an eating problem is not just about food. It is also about the feelings and emotions that cause it as well as those it can trigger.

An eating problem can become an eating disorder if your behaviour meets the medical criteria for a diagnosis. A doctor will look at your eating patterns to make a diagnosis.

**While historically eating disorders have affected more girls than boys, it's a growing problem for young men and around 25% of those with eating problems are now male.**



# Why do people get eating problems?

Wanting to be a healthy weight is great. It means your body can function healthily and a good diet can have real benefits to your mental health.

But sometimes, emotions and feelings can become confused and lead to an eating problem.



These can include:

- Feeling out of control and that your body is the one thing you can control
- Wanting to be popular and confusing being slim like models or celebrities with being attractive or successful
- Knowing parents who worry obsessively about their own weight
- Feeling you aren't good enough
- Carrying on with not eating after recovering from an illness
- Hating your body after something has happened to you or if you have been abused
- Starting a diet but not being able to stop
- Sometimes you can't pin point an exact trigger or cause

Body fat is absolutely normal. In fact, your body needs fat in order to function healthily.

# Anorexia: What is it?

**Anorexia** is an eating disorder where you worry about your weight (and body shape), want to lose weight and eat less and less food. It's a serious mental health condition, but with the right help, you can recover and take back your life.

If things feel out of control, you might think restricting what you eat will be a way of feeling more in charge.

Girls are 10 times more likely than boys to get anorexia, but eating disorders are becoming more common among males.





# Anorexia: the symptoms

The symptoms of anorexia nervosa are both physical and mental and include:

- eating less and less
- exercising too much on a regular basis (feeling anxious if you are unable to exercise)
- feeling panicky about eating in front of others or having a big meal
- feeling fat even though people tell you you're too thin
- obsession with body image and comparing your body to others
- low mood and irritability
- trying to lose weight through other ways (self induced vomiting, diuretics, laxatives)

## **Physical changes:**

- losing lots of weight quickly
- periods stopping or being unable to have an erection
- feeling cold all the time
- poor sleep and concentration
- unexpected hair growth on body parts (languo)

# Bulimia: What is it?

**Bulimia** is an eating disorder where you get into a cycle of overeating and then making yourself sick or using laxatives to try to get rid of the food.

People with bulimia may have previously suffered from anorexia and they can also happen at the same time. You may feel that parts of your life are out of control, and that purging or restricting calories gives you a sense of control.

Bulimia can seriously damage your body, so it's important to get help and find other ways of coping. Some people develop bulimia when they hate their bodies, feel that being thin means being happy or successful, or they want to look like a model or celebrity. It usually develops during the teenage years.

## Bulimia: the symptoms

You may experience short and long-term effects on your body, as well as emotional and behavioural symptoms:

- thinking obsessively about your weight
- preoccupation with eating
- binge eating
- making yourself vomit
- taking laxatives to lose weight
- exercising too much on a regular basis (feeling anxious if you are unable to exercise)
- isolating yourself
- poor sleep
- stomach cramps
- feeling helpless and out of control
- low mood
- losing interest in things and people
- change in periods (for girls)
- brittle bones which break easily (this happens with sustained illness)
- feeling weak and tired

# Compulsive overeating: What is it?

Overeating may also be referred to as binge or compulsive eating. Their definitions overlap, but binge or compulsive eating are usually seen as disorders.

Whatever the definition, they all involve eating when you're not hungry or when you can't stop when you've had enough food. Some sufferers describe it as an uncontrollable addiction to food.

Overeating becomes a problem when it starts to affect your health.

This includes physical problems like excessive weight gain as well as mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

## Overeating: the symptoms

The symptoms of overeating, binge eating and compulsive eating are typically the same.

They usually involve experiencing some of the following, at least 3 times a week:

- Eating quicker than usual
- Eating even when you're full
- Eating when you're not hungry
- Eating alone or in secret

Typically, you'll feel upset or guilty after any of these activities and sometimes, you'll feel as if you're being driven to do it, even though you know you shouldn't.



# Coping with eating problems: take the first step

It's hard to admit you have an eating problem. In fact, most people try to hide it or lie about what they're eating.

But once you tell someone, there is a lot of help available. Talking to someone you trust can help you feel able to cope with the problem. Good people to talk to include:

- Family members
- Friends
- A teacher
- Your school nurse
- A school or youth counsellor
- Youth workers

You can also tell your doctor. They may then be able to refer you to a specialist who can help or even prescribe medicines which could help.

# Coping with eating problems: After you've told someone

Once you've taken the first step, there is help available. Here's what you can expect

- > **You may be referred to a therapist or counselor** – they'll talk to you about your feelings and problems and work with you to understand why you have an eating problem
- > **A dietician will be able to help you and your family understand the effect on your health and also help you find a healthier diet**

In most cases you'll be an out-patient. However, for a minority of people, their weight is dangerously low and they may need to stay in hospital.

# Helping someone with an eating problem

If you know someone with an eating problem, your support can be essential. Here are some tips for helping to support them.

- **Listen** and give them time
- **Encourage** them to get medical help
- **Tell them** you are there for them
- **Include them in activities** that don't always involve food – don't make them feel different
- **Don't feel guilty** or take responsibility
- **Set a good example** and keep up your own healthy eating habits
- **Don't give up** – even if they push you away, stay supportive



“Support is available: It is scary asking for support. I know that. You don’t want people to interfere who make you fat. But they won’t. They just want to help.”

- Hope



# Where to go for help



[youngminds.org.uk/eating-problems](https://youngminds.org.uk/eating-problems)

## childline.org.uk

The UK's free helpline for children and young people – it's a confidential service and provides telephone counselling for any child with a problem.

**Helpline:** 0800 1111

**Textphone:** 0800 400 222

*Mon-Fri 9:30am-9:30pm | Sat and Sun: 11am-8pm*

---

## b-eat.co.uk

The UK's leading charity supporting anyone affected by eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia.

**Helpline:** 0808 801 0677

---

## eating-disorders.org.uk

The National Centre for Eating Disorders – a confidential counselling service that runs counselling and workshops for people with eating disorders.

**Helpline:** 0845 838 2040

---



YoungMinds  
Suite 11 Baden Place  
Crosby Row  
London SE1 1YW  
**Telephone** 020 7089 5050

[yomenquiries@youngminds.org.uk](mailto:yomenquiries@youngminds.org.uk)

**[youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)**



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

Registered charity number: 1016968

Company limited by guarantee number: 02780643

Thank you to Dr Andrea Gnanadurai and her colleagues at the Child and Family Public Engagement Board, Royal College of Psychiatry for fact checking this booklet.