



# YOUNG MINDS

## Eating problems and your child

Your guide to the signs and  
helping them find support



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



# Eating disorders can affect their health.

Eating problems can take a number of different forms from anorexia and bulimia to overeating and binge eating and can be a mixture of a few at the same time.

Sometimes it can be hard to spot, as people with eating problems are often ashamed and keep it a secret.

Eating disorders can be dangerous, and have serious health implications if they cause your child's weight to drop too low or rise too high.

In this leaflet, you'll find information on various eating disorders, how to spot the signs and how you can help as a parent or carer.

# What is an eating problem?

An eating problem is when someone's eating habits become unhealthy such as eating too much or eating too little. An eating problem may be considered to be an eating disorder if your child's behaviour meets the medical criteria for a diagnosis. A doctor will look at their eating patterns to make a diagnosis.

As your child's body changes, it can be a scary time for them. These feelings usually pass with time but in some cases, the anxiety over what they're experiencing can lead to problems with food. Although it is most common for eating disorders to develop during adolescence, eating disorders can also affect young children.

Your child may try dieting, or make a conscious effort to eat healthily. But if your child isn't eating a regular balanced diet over a longer period of time, it could become a problem. This can be very hard to cope with but it's important to understand that eating problems

“When I was younger, I thought I had discovered something that was just for me. Something that gave me hope and reassurance when life felt tough. I thought it could teach me everything I needed to know and could make me feel good about myself. That something was anorexia. But in reality it couldn’t. In reality, it sucked me in to a manipulative game.”

- Hope

aren’t just about food. They can be about difficult things in their life and painful feelings, which they may find hard to express, face or resolve. Focusing on food can be a way of disguising the problems, even from themselves. Your support is essential, so try to get help as soon as possible.

# Why do young people get eating problems?

There are a whole host of reasons a child can develop an eating problem, including:

- Having parents who worry obsessively about their own weight
- Feeling out of control – in these cases they feel their body is the one thing they can control
- Trying to be popular and wanting to look like celebrities and sports stars
- Feeling they aren't good enough
- Hating their body
- Starting a diet but not being able to stop
- Overeating and not being able to stop

Sometimes there is no identifiable reason or a mixture of things going on.

“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



# Anorexia: What is it?

**Anorexia nervosa** is an eating disorder where you have an extreme fear of gaining weight. Girls are 10 times more likely than boys to get anorexia, but eating disorders are becoming more common among males.

The symptoms include:

- eating less and less
- exercising too much on a regular basis
- losing lots of weight quickly or over time
- feeling panicky about eating in front of others or having a big meal
- feeling fat even though people tell them they're too thin
- obsession with body image and comparing their body to others
- lying about eating when they haven't
- periods stopping or being unable to have an erection





# Bulimia: What is it?

**Bulimia nervosa** is an eating disorder where a person gets into a cycle of overeating – bingeing – and then making themselves sick or using laxatives to try to get rid of the food. Other methods are used such as diet pills to prevent weight gain. People with bulimia may have previously suffered from anorexia and they can also co-exist.

The symptoms include:

- thinking obsessively about weight
- binge eating
- vomiting or taking laxatives
- exercising too much on a regular basis
- isolating themselves
- losing interest in things and people
- change in periods
- brittle bones in the long term
- stomach cramps

# Compulsive overeating: What is it?

Also known as binge eating, **compulsive overeating** is when someone feels compelled to eat when they're not hungry or can't stop after they've had enough food. Compulsive overeaters usually involve doing some of the following, at least three times a week:

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

Overeaters often feel upset or guilty after any of these activities and sometimes feel as if they're being driven to do it, even though they know they shouldn't. That's why compulsive overeaters sometimes talk of having an 'addiction' to food as they feel it's out of their control.

The sooner someone gets  
the treatment they need, the  
more likely they are to make  
a full recovery.\*

\*Source: [www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)



# Coping with eating problems: how you can help

If you think your child has an eating problem, or if they've been clinically diagnosed with an eating disorder, your support is essential.

It's important to know that for them, telling you is the hardest part and **takes a lot of courage** to do.



Here are some tips for helping to support them when they come to you:

- **Listen** and give them time
- **Encourage them** to get medical help
- **Tell them** you are there for them
- **Learn as much as you can** about eating disorders
- **Include them in activities** – don't make them feel different
- **Don't put pressure on them** – this can often have an adverse effect
- **Don't feel guilty** or responsible
- **Set a good example** and keep up your own healthy eating habits
- **Avoid** talking about your child's appearance
- **Don't give up** – even if they push you away, stay supportive

# What kind of treatment is available?

Getting help as early as possible is essential. Eating disorders tend to get worse over time and untreated, could lead to serious physical health problems linked to being under or overweight.



There is plenty of help available. The first port of call is always your GP. They'll decide the best person to refer you to, that could include:

- **Therapy or counselling – a trained professional will talk to your child** and work with them to understand why they have an eating problem. You can usually join the sessions if your child is comfortable with this.
- **A dietician can help them understand the effect on their health** and also help them find a healthier diet

In most cases your child will be an outpatient.

However, for a minority of people their weight is dangerously low and they may need to stay in a special unit or hospital.

# Where to go for help



## youngminds.org.uk

Support and advice for parents worried about a child or young person.

**Helpline:** 0808 802 5544

*Mon-Fri 9:30am – 4pm*

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## b-eat.co.uk

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

**Helpline:** 0808 801 0677

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## 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

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