



NUTRI-BYTES[©]

Eating Disorders: Complex Conditions

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a psychological condition that involves negative self-image and low self-esteem. The most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. Anorexia nervosa is characterized by excessive weight loss, self-starvation, and fear of gaining weight. Bulimia nervosa includes recurrent bouts of bingeing (eating a large amount of food in a fixed time period while feeling a lack of control) followed by purging (with laxatives or vomiting) or excessive exercise. Binge eating disorder (BED) includes repeated episodes of bingeing without purging; therefore, persons with BED tend to be overweight or obese.

What causes eating disorders?

More than likely, psychological, biological, and social factors contribute to the development of eating disorders. Psychological conditions such as depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder disorders are common in persons with eating disorders. Recent research suggests that genetic factors and imbalances of specific neurotransmitters and hormones that control appetite increase the risk of eating disorders. Since eating disorders occur in developed countries, cultural pressures to be thin are likely contributors. While society and the media promote calorie-dense foods, they also market thinness as the symbol of beauty and acceptance. Unfortunately, families may reinforce society's message by valuing physical appearance more than other important attributes.

How are eating disorders treated?

Eating disorders occur in all developed countries and socioeconomic levels. Although most common in young females, ages 12-25 years, eating disorders can develop in males and females of any age. Treatment can be difficult due to the person's unwillingness to seek or adhere to treatment regimens. The choice of treatment site (inpatient hospitalization, residential program, or outpatient counseling) depends on the severity of the disorder as well as the patient's health insurance coverage and financial status. The initial goal is to treat life-threatening medical complications via fluid, nutrients, and medication, followed by psychological therapy. A multidisciplinary team of professionals (physician, psychologist, nurse, and dietitian) with expertise in eating disorders is essential for optimal treatment. Dietitians provide nutrition counseling to normalize weight, eating habits, and perceptions about food.

How can I help a friend or relative who may have an eating disorder?

If you suspect a friend or family member of having an eating disorder, you should talk with them in a non-confrontational way, show your support, and encourage them to seek professional help. Early treatment is a key to recovery from eating disorders. Additional information, resources, and referrals can be found on websites of national organizations, such as the National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders (www.anad.org) and the National Eating Disorders Association (www.nationaleatingdisorders.org).