

What is an Eating Disorder?

Eating disorders are behavioral health illnesses that are characterized by strong feelings, attitudes and behaviors about weight and food. The exact causes are unknown but research suggests that they include genetic, biological, psychological, cultural and social factors.

We may all overeat from time to time or diet to lose a few pounds. But when one's eating behavior becomes a rigid and extreme pattern of restriction of eating (anorexia), excessive overeating and purging (bulimia) or binge eating, that person may have an eating disorder.

An eating disorder is a treatable, medical illness. It may be accompanied by depression, anxiety, feelings of shame and guilt and negative feelings about oneself or one's body. Early detection and treatment are important. The sooner a person receives treatment, the better the chances are of a full recovery.

Symptoms of an eating disorder may not be obvious. Those people closest to a person suffering with an eating disorder may not recognize the symptoms for some time, because people with an eating disorder often try to hide it. Eating disorders can affect anyone regardless of gender or age.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Multi-Service Eating Disorder Association (MEDA)

866.343.MEDA | medainc.org

MEDA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention and treatment of eating disorders and disordered eating. MEDA serves as a support network and resource for patients and families.

National Institute of Mental Health

866.615.6464 | nimh.nih.gov

This organization provides information about the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of mental health issues. Brochures, information sheets, and other educational information are available.

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)

800.931.2237 | nationaleatingdisorders.org

NEDA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting individuals and families affected by eating disorders.

For more information and referrals for treatment tuftshealthplan.com or call Member Services at the number on your Tufts Health Plan member ID card. Your Primary Care Physician can also be a helpful resource.

Behavioral Health

EATING DISORDERS



Anorexia, Bulimia and Binge Eating Are Three Main Types of Eating Disorders

Anorexia: People with anorexia demonstrate an excessive effort to lose weight and an extreme fear of gaining weight. People with anorexia are often very thin and their bodies do not always have the nutrients necessary to function normally.

Symptoms of anorexia include:

- ▶ Refusing to eat and having a fear of gaining weight
- ▶ Developing food rituals, such as cutting food into tiny pieces or rearranging food on the plate, while eating little
- ▶ A preoccupation with weight, food, calories, or fat grams
- ▶ Making excuses to skip meals
- ▶ Losing weight quickly
- ▶ Having a distorted body image, feeling “fat” even when underweight and malnourished
- ▶ Exercising excessively to lose weight
- ▶ Loss of menstruation in women who have reached puberty

Bulimia: Bulimia involves repeated episodes of excessive eating, or “binging”. During a binge, a person with bulimia loses control over his or her eating and then experiences an intense urge to get rid of the food by purging. Purging can take many forms, including self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, or the use of laxatives. Unlike those suffering with anorexia, people with bulimia often remain within a normal weight range, however they may experience other medical complications.

Symptoms of bulimia include:

- ▶ Binge eating in private
- ▶ Extreme dissatisfaction with body size and shape, feeling “fat”
- ▶ Perfectionist personality
- ▶ Planning the day to find times for secretive bingeing and purging
- ▶ Going to the bathroom frequently after meals
- ▶ Dental problems as a result of frequent vomiting
- ▶ Acid Reflux

Binge Eating Disorder: Those struggling with Binge Eating Disorder experience uncontrollable eating, sometimes done in secret and when not physically hungry. People who are very overweight may be struggling with binge eating disorder, although people who have a binge eating disorder may be of average size or even underweight.

Symptoms of Binge Eating Disorder:

- ▶ Unable to stop eating voluntarily
- ▶ Eating rapidly
- ▶ Eating until feeling bloated or uncomfortably full
- ▶ Eating alone
- ▶ Hoarding or stealing food

Seeking Treatment

Untreated eating disorders can become life threatening. Early identification and treatment can lead to greater success.

There are different levels of treatment services that are effective in helping people with an eating disorder. An evaluation needs to be done by a behavioral health specialist to recommend which level of care would be most appropriate. This evaluation may also include consults with medical and nutrition professionals. It is important that treatment plans are tailored to an individual’s specific needs.

Goals of treatment are to work towards medically stabilizing someone with an eating disorder; helping the person stop the self-destructive behaviors and develop healthy eating habits; and to address and resolve any emotional issues that may be contributing to the eating disorder.

Depending on the results of an evaluation, treatment may include inpatient hospitalization, acute residential treatment, partial hospitalization, intensive outpatient treatment, outpatient cognitive behavioral therapy and outpatient psychotherapy. Other services include nutrition counseling, medical weight monitoring and psychiatric medication when appropriate. It is important for members of the treatment team to work closely together for greater success in resolving an eating disorder.

If you feel you or a family member might have an eating disorder, talk with your primary care physician, who can be a helpful resource for an appropriate referral for treatment.