

FACT SHEET

Eating Disorders: Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa

What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by a drastic weight loss from dieting, which can be accompanied by over-exercising and the abuse of laxatives. The individual's body image is distorted and an intense fear of becoming obese takes over. This can lead to emaciation, failing physical and psychological health and sometimes death. Most people with anorexia experience distorted thinking and do not recognize how underweight they are, which makes it difficult to convince them to seek treatment.

What is bulimia nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa is the most common clinical eating disorder. It is characterized by secretive episodes of binge eating followed by self-induced vomiting, the use of laxatives or diuretics, or excessive exercise and fasting. It is common for individuals to binge several times a week, during which they may consume as many as 5,000-10,000 calories in a manner of minutes or hours. Unlike anorexia, bulimia can be difficult to diagnose because it is secretive and people may maintain a fairly steady weight level due to the counterbalancing cycle of bingeing and purging.

- approximately 90% of those with eating disorders are women
- over 38,000 Canadian women suffer from anorexia nervosa
- more than 114,000 women are known to suffer from bulimia in Canada
- eating disorders usually develop in people between ages 14–25
- eating disorders often, although not always, occur in combination with a history of child sexual abuse

What causes anorexia or bulimia?

The exact reasons as to why an individual develops an eating disorder is unknown, although certain pressures may lead an individual to anorexia or bulimia. For example:

- Society's emphasis on thinness and fitness contributes to young girls' self-destructive image of themselves. Eating disorders have traditionally affected young women, but with a new focus on men's bodies in advertising and action films, a growing number of young men have started to develop eating disorders.
- During puberty there is a new emphasis on the body. Since so much value is placed upon image, anything less than society's version of the extremely thin ideal can contribute to low self-esteem or depression, which can lead to an eating disorder.

- Eating disorders may also develop when an individual is trying to gain control in her life. If she is experiencing stress, anger or anxiety problems towards family or relationships, the control over her intake of food can be seen as the ultimate way to control her life. Unfortunately, what starts out as a means to gain control soon takes control over her perceptions and her body.

What are the symptoms?

Severe weight loss leads to other physical and emotional complications. People who are anorexic or bulimic may experience several or all the following symptoms:

- noticeable weight loss (with distorted body image) – particularly in the case of anorexia
- inconspicuous binge eating (feeling shame or guilt) followed by purging – in the case of bulimia
- throat irritation due to repeated vomiting
- growth of fine body hair
- excessive constipation
- swollen glands
- severe dehydration
- depression and mood swings
- menstrual irregularities
- tooth loss/decay
- risk of heart irregularities
- hyperactivity

Living with anorexia or bulimia can be a devastating experience, and without treatment, anorexia can be life threatening. Also, after years of secret bingeing and purging, people with bulimia can develop serious gastro-intestinal disorders and other physical ailments than can threaten life. The denial of problems and thinking or feeling that “nothing is wrong” are often part of the illness. Eating disorders can be overcome.

What are the treatments?

Research has indicated that the earlier the appropriate intervention occurs, the more likely the eating disorder will be successfully overcome. The best approach is psychotherapy, which can include counseling for the family, along with group therapy with other people who have eating disorders. Medical treatments are used in severe cases. Finding a knowledgeable professional with whom you feel comfortable and can trust in discussing your situation is very important to one's success.

Where can I get help?

If you or a loved one appears to be suffering from an eating disorder, you should talk to your family physician or the National Eating Disorder Information Centre (416-340-4156, 1-866-633-4220, www.nedic.ca), which has a national register of private therapists, medical programs and information. Remember, you are not alone. You will be taking a major step toward recovery when you begin to seek help. For more information, contact the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, toll-free at 1-800-875-6213 or visit www.ontario.cmha.ca.