

# What is an Eating Disorder?



The Butterfly Foundation  
Supporting Australians with Eating Disorders

## GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT EATING DISORDERS

An eating disorder is a serious mental illness that involves preoccupation with control over one's body weight, shape, eating and exercising. It can be a way of dealing with underlying unresolved emotional and psychological issues. An eating disorder is **not** a lifestyle choice.

There are four different types of eating disorders, all with different characteristics and causes. Eating disorders can affect anyone. They do not discriminate by age, sex or race.

The incidence of eating disorders in the total population is 2-3% and increasing, while the average age of onset is decreasing. Eating disorders affect more women than men, however eating disorders may be underdiagnosed in men due to them being less likely to seek help for an illness that is often seen to only be a 'women's issue.'

## ANOREXIA NERVOSA

Anorexia Nervosa is characterised by severe starvation and weight loss, sometimes with purging behaviours as well. Anorexia sufferers experience high body distortion and mistakenly believe and feel they are overweight, no matter how underweight they may actually be.

## BULIMIA NERVOSA

Bulimia Nervosa is characterised by recurrent binge eating episodes followed by compensatory behaviours such as self induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, diuretics, enemas and other medications, fasting and overexercising. A binge episode involves consuming a large amount of food in a short period of time, whilst also experiencing a loss of control and intense feelings of guilt.

An eating disorder is **not** a lifestyle choice.

## BINGE EATING DISORDER

Binge Eating Disorder is characterised by periods of binge eating without compensatory behaviours. Bingeing normally involves eating excessive amounts of food, often when not hungry, followed by intense feelings of guilt, depression and shame. Bingeing often serves as a distraction for someone to avoid thinking about underlying emotional difficulties. BED affects men and women equally.

# What is an Eating Disorder?

Continued

## *EATING DISORDER NOT OTHERWISE SPECIFIED (EDNOS)*

EDNOS is a term used to describe an atypical presentation of an eating disorder that does not meet all of the diagnostic criteria for anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder. This does not mean in any way that someone experiencing an EDNOS is any less unwell or deserving of help.

## *WARNING SIGNS OF AN EATING DISORDER*

It is important to be aware of the warning signs of an eating disorder. If you or someone you know are experiencing these symptoms it may mean that you are at risk of developing an eating disorder, or be experiencing one already. The signs to be most cautious of occur in clusters. It is important to seek help and support as soon as possible for an eating disorder, as it has been shown that early intervention allows the chances of a shorter recovery time.

## *Physical Signs*

- Rapid fluctuation in weight (loss or gains)
- Menstrual changes and irregularities
- Poor dental health, such as gum disease and enamel loss
- Broadening jaw line and swollen salivary glands due to vomiting
- Feeling consistently cold with poor circulation
- Unexplained fainting, dehydration and/or electrolyte disturbances
- Poor sleep quality, tiredness
- Use of appetite suppressants, laxatives, diuretics
- Somatic complaints – Gastrointestinal disorders (bloating, constipation, intolerance to foods)



## *Behavioural Signs*

- Avoiding socialising, especially when eating is involved
- Increasing isolation and loss of friends
- Frequent self weighing
- Excessive or extreme exercise
- Secretative behaviour and covering up the truth
- Changes in eating patterns, such as restrictive eating or reporting of food allergies or vegetarianism
- Dieting to lose weight
- Trips to the bathroom after meals
- Body image disturbance

## *Psychological Signs*

- Refusing to maintain a healthy weight, including fear of weight gain
- Obsessive thoughts about food
- Feeling “fat” despite being a normal weight
- Perfectionism and self criticism
- Life centres around food and need for control
- Depression, anxiety and moodiness
- Self harm, suicide ideation and suicide attempts

## *WHERE TO GO FOR HELP*

It is important that if you believe you or someone you know has an eating disorder to seek professional assistance immediately. It can be scary to make this first step, however the earlier help is sought the quicker the road to recovery. If you require a referral to a general practitioner or other health practitioner practicing in the eating disorder field, contact The Butterfly Foundation for a list of names and numbers.

The Butterfly Foundation offers telephone and email support for those with eating disorders and their family and friends. This confidential and supportive counselling service is available on (02) 9412 4499 or at

[support@thebutterflyfoundation.org.au](mailto:support@thebutterflyfoundation.org.au)