

Eating Disorders: What Are They?

What Are Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders are extreme expressions of food and weight issues experienced by many individuals, particularly girls and women. They include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating. Eating disorders are dangerous behaviors that result in big health problems.

Girls with eating disorders can do major damage to their bodies. Restricting what you eat can make you sick—like feeling nauseous, tired, dizzy, or irritable. If this behavior goes on too long, it can mess up your menstrual cycle, dry out your hair and skin, and might even cause early osteoporosis—a disease of the bones. The physical consequences can become life threatening.

But the physical problems are only half the story. The emotional problems can be serious too. An unhealthy attitude about food and body image is the main problem. Some girls use food to make themselves feel better; others stop eating to feel like they are "in control" of their life. Both behaviors leave people feeling bad about what they are eating. And worst of all, the more people begin to obsess over what they are eating (or not eating), the less they care about other things—like school, friends, or other activities.

How Do People Get Eating Disorders?

Experts don't know exactly how people develop eating disorders, but it is likely the result of many factors. Many people who suffer from eating disorders have low self-esteem. Most people with eating disorders share certain traits such as a fear of becoming fat, feelings of not measuring up to other people's expectations, or feeling helpless. Some people with eating disorders feel they have to be perfect in every way—having a perfect body, getting perfect grades, and being an excellent athlete. People who suffer from eating disorders may be depressed or feel they lack control over their lives. Sometimes, they also feel like they don't fit in or don't belong. Often, the problems begin when a person is dealing with a difficult transition, shock, or loss.

Girls often experiment with different ways to lose as much weight as possible or to keep their weight down. Here are some examples of unsafe methods girls use to control their weight:

- **Diuretics** (or water pills) make your body lose water but also important nutrients. In extreme cases, this can cause heart problems.
- **Laxatives** can cause stomachaches and cramps as well as other serious problems to your digestive system. Laxatives can become habit-forming.
- **Self-induced vomiting**, even once in a while, can pop blood vessels in your face and swell up your neck glands. Because your food isn't being digested right, you may suffer stomachaches, constipation, heartburn, or diarrhea. Also, repeated vomiting can ruin your teeth and give you cavities.
- **Diet pills** can cause your heart to beat faster and make you jittery. They also are habit-forming. Once they wear off, you become hungry and want to eat, so you reach for another pill to control your appetite.
- **Serious over exercising** is another unhealthy way some people control their weight. Exercising for long periods of time when it is not part of a program (like with your school coach) is not smart. Over exercising will make you feel tired and increase your chance of injuries.

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