

TEEN EATING DISORDERS

ANOREXIA, BULIMIA, BINGE EATING



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Introduction

Eating disorders are complex illnesses that affect how an individual handles their eating habits and weight management. Eating disorders affect men and women of all ages, however these disorders will typically begin in pre-adolescent or adolescent years. In the United States, millions of teens and young adults are suffering from eating disorders.

Eating disorders can be categorized into three types: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating. All three types are psychological disorders. All eating disorders involve an extreme disturbance or change in typical eating patterns.

Serious complications can arise as a result of eating disorders. It is particularly important for these disorders to be discovered early, as proper treatment and recovery are possible.

Statistics on Eating Disorders in Teens

Healthy Teen Project found that 95% of those with eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25. WebMD states that anorexia alone affects one in every 100 girls. In fact, girls are most prone to develop an eating disorder. More than 90% of teens and adults who suffer from an eating disorder are female. One study found that 36% of teenage girls feel that they are overweight. Among high school students, 15% of males and 44% of females are attempting to lose weight. Even those who engage in normal dieting habits tend to progress to pathological dieting. In fact, 35% of those with a 'normal diet' will move on to unhealthy alternatives. Of that 35%, 20-25% exhibit signs of a full or partial eating disorder. Over half of teen girls and one third of boys have been cited to use unhealthy activities or behaviors to control their weight. These behaviors include skipping meals, smoking, purging, etc.

What Causes Teenagers to Have Eating Disorders?

Why teens and young adults develop eating disorders is not fully known. Experts agree that there are a variety of factors involved that may put teenagers at risk for developing eating disorders. Mayo Clinic cites these three factors as: societal pressure, activities, and personal factors.

Societal Pressure. In today's culture and society, a high value is placed on being thin. Skinny is perceived as beauty. There's no shortage of this message, as we see it on television, in advertisements, billboards, movies, and more. Even though many teens have a healthy body weight, they develop a perception that they are 'fat.' When a teen believes that their body is not ideal, it is very easy for them to develop an eating disorder. They may become obsessive about losing weight, dieting, and fitting a new image they have created.

Activities. Teens often look up to celebrities and other famous figures. Whether these figures are models, athletes, movie stars, etc. the activity behind their profession calls for a specific body image.

Teens who are involved in activities that value and emphasize leanness, such as modeling and elite athletics, may be at an increased risk of developing an eating disorder.

Personal Factors. Some individuals may naturally be more prone to developing eating disorders than others. Genetics or biological factors may play a role in whether or not a teen develops an eating disorder. Personality may also contribute to the illness, as traits like perfectionism, [anxiety](#), or rigidity can cause a teen to be more prone towards an eating disorder.

Signs and Symptoms of Eating Disorders in Teens

There are a variety of signs and symptoms that can allude to an eating disorder in a teenager. Signs and symptoms may vary, depending on which type of eating disorder a teen is suffering from. Parents need to be alert for eating disorder symptoms, as the disorder is often kept secret. If left untreated, eating disorders can lead to severe illness or even death.

Some characteristics and signs that a teenager is suffering from an eating disorder include:

- Skipping Meals
- Making Excuses for Not Eating or Eating in Secret
- Obsession with Food & Healthy Eating
- Persistent Mention of Weight (being fat or losing weight)
- Frequently Checking the Mirror for 'Flaws'
- Gorging of High-fat Foods or Sweets
- Use of Dietary Supplements, Laxatives or Herbal Products to Lose Weight
- Excessive & Intense Exercising
- Regularly Going to the Restroom after Eating
- Eating More Food than is Considered Normal in One Sitting
- Expressing Depression, Guilt, Shame, or Disgust for their Eating Habits
- Frequently Weighing Themselves

Physical signs of an eating disorder may also occur. These signs include:

- Insomnia
- Constipation
- Skin Rash
- Dry Skin
- Dental Cavities
- Erosion of Tooth Enamel
- Loss of Hair or Nail Quality

Teens suffering from eating disorders may express negative emotions such as [depression](#), [anxiety](#), or moodiness. They are often in denial that anything is wrong. It is not uncommon for a teen with an eating disorder to withdraw socially from friends and families. A teen with an eating disorder will become overly sensitive to criticism, which can become increasingly dangerous as others may not be

aware of the severity of the condition of the teen. Insecurities, like depression or low self-esteem can lead to eating disorders.

What Are the Types of Eating Disorders?

There are three distinct types of eating disorders. These include: Anorexia, Bulimia, and Binge Eating.

Anorexia

Anorexia nervosa involves taking extreme measures to limit food intake. Teens who suffer from anorexia are likely to look abnormally thin for their age or body type. However, these teens will still perceive themselves as fat. Even at unhealthy weights, these teenagers will continue to diet, avoiding eating and limiting the food they intake due to their distorted body image.

Signs Your Teenager may be Anorexic:

- A Distorted Body Image- Perceiving themselves as fat (even when underweight)
- Hiding Food
- Secretly Discarding Food
- Obsessively Counting Calories or Grams of Fat in Food
- Denial of Hunger
- Rituals Regarding Food Preparation
- Social Withdraw
- Compulsive & Excessive Exercise
- Changes in Emotion such as Irritability, Depression or Anxiety

Physical Signs of Anorexia in a Teen:

- Rapid & Excessive Weight Loss
- Feeling Cold
- Feeling Tired
- Being/Appearing Weak
- Thinning Hair
- Absence of Menstrual Cycles in Females
- Dizziness
- Fainting

Bulimia

According to Healthy Teen Project, teens with bulimia will binge and purge in order to regulate weight. They will engage in uncontrollable episodes of overeating (bingeing). This bingeing is often followed by compensatory behaviors of purging. Purging may include vomiting, use of laxatives,

enemas, fasting, or excessive exercise. This process may occur throughout the day, but is most typically done in the evening and night hours.

Bulimia is often unnoticed and undiagnosed in teens. This is because bulimic teens are able to maintain a normal body weight.

Signs Your Teenager may be Bulimic:

- Eating Unusually Large Meals with No Weight Change
- Hiding Food and Discarded Wrappers/Containers
- Excessive Exercise
- Fasting
- Peculiar Eating Habits
- Eating Rituals
- Frequenting the Restroom After Meals
- Inappropriate Use of Laxatives, Diuretics or Cathartics
- Impulsive Behavior
- Overachievement
- Clogged Showers or Toilets in the Home

Physical Signs of Bulimia:

- Discolored Teeth
- Odor on Breath
- Stomach Pain
- Callused or Scarred Hands (caused by self-induced vomiting)
- Irregular Menstrual Cycles
- Weakness
- Fatigue

Binge Eating

Binge eating is the act of uncontrollably eating excessive amounts of food. This act is often followed by feelings of shame or guilt. Binge eating is unlike bulimia because sufferers do not purge to compensate for the binges.

Signs Your Teenager is Binge Eating:

- Eating Large Amounts of Food within 2 Hours
- Eating Quickly
- Hiding Food or Wrappers
- Eating in Secret
- Eating when Stressed
- Feelings of Disgust and a Lack of Self Control

- Experimenting with Diets

Physical Signs of Binge Eating

- Weight gain
- High Blood Pressure
- Diabetes
- Irregular Menstrual Cycle
- Skin Disorders
- Heart Disease

If left untreated, eating disorders can lead to very serious illnesses or even death. For teen girls, anorexia can lead to decreased or loss of menstrual periods. According to WebMD, this loss is associated with osteopenia or early bone loss. This can also lead to painful fractures.

Eating disorders have also been linked to kidney and heart diseases. Health problems related to eating disorders require specific tests and treatment.

Treatment for Teens with Eating Disorders

If you suspect that your teenage may have an eating disorder, it is very important to seek professional help. Seeking guidance from a doctor or psychiatrist is often the course of action taken by parents.