

# Eating disorders

Information for individuals, partners and families

**NCMH**  
National Centre for Mental Health

# Eating disorders



Ymchwil Iechyd  
a Gofal Cymru  
Health and Care  
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When a person develops an unhealthy attitude towards food that causes them to drastically change their behaviour and diet, this is known as an eating disorder.

Around 1.6m people in the UK are estimated to be affected by eating disorders. While it is more common for young women to develop eating disorders, people from all genders, backgrounds, ethnic groups and ages can be affected.

There are many forms of eating disorder, but the most common are **binge eating disorder (BED)**, **bulimia** and **anorexia**.

- People with **BED** regularly eat what most people would consider to be unusually large amounts of food in a short time and feel out of control when doing so. This is often called bingeing.
- People with **bulimia** also binge on food, but they will then get rid of the food they have eaten (sometimes called purging) by making themselves vomit or by using laxatives.
- People with **anorexia** severely restrict the amount of food they eat, often eating less than they need to stay healthy. They can become very focused on their weight and body shape.

They can have a significant impact on a person's health and quality of life.

The causes of eating disorders are complicated, but research suggests that our life experiences, our psychological state and our genetics all play a part.

## Getting help



The physical effects of eating disorders can be serious so it is important for people affected by them to get help.

The first step towards getting help with an eating disorder is to speak to your GP.

Approaching your doctor, either for yourself or someone you care about, can seem like a daunting task. You may feel embarrassed or guilty, or that you're wasting their time. Don't let these things put you off talking to your GP and asking for help - that's what they're there for.

It's quite common for a person with an eating disorder to feel that they don't want or need help, as the condition can seem like it is integral to them as a person. For example, if someone believes they need to lose weight, they may feel that purging helps them to do this, despite the negative effect this may have on their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Your doctor will understand this, and it's ok for you to mention that you feel this way.

Your doctor may use a series of questions to help assess whether or not you are suffering from an eating disorder.

It's important to note that their diagnosis won't just be based on these questions, and you don't have to say yes to all of them to be diagnosed with having an eating disorder.

Think about your answers to these questions before you visit your GP - it could help to make the conversation easier:

- Do you make yourself sick because you feel uncomfortably full?
- Do you worry you have lost control over how much you eat?
- Have you recently lost more than one stone (6kg) in a 3 month period?
- Do you believe yourself to be fat when others say you are too thin?
- Would you say that food dominates your life?

What happens after you speak to your doctor will depend on your needs.

In some cases your GP will treat you themselves, but if they think that you need specialist help, you may be referred to mental health services.

You may be referred to a specialist eating disorders service if your GP thinks this is necessary.

## Treatments for eating disorders

Everyone experiences eating disorders differently, so treatment is based around each person's needs.

For some people the first step may be to follow a self-help programme, possibly with encouragement and support from a health professional.

There are also different types of talking treatments available for eating disorders depending on your needs.



For example, in moderate to severe cases this could include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or Interpersonal Therapy (IPT). CBT is a type of counselling that helps a person to understand and change the way they think and behave. IPT counselling focuses on issues with interpersonal relationships.

It is important to note that while you can expect some form of talking treatment, not every kind of therapy will be appropriate or available in all cases.

Treatment may also involve careful monitoring of your physical health.

People with bulimia or binge eating disorder and those that have problems with other conditions such as depression or anxiety may be prescribed medication, but this is not usually the case with anorexia.

# Tips for people with eating disorders

- Asking for help can be very difficult. Talk to someone you can trust, whether it's a parent, a teacher or a good friend. Speaking to your doctor will be easier with their support.
- Recovering from an eating disorder is not easy, and it can take time. Try not to be hard on yourself if you suffer a setback.
- Try to keep doing the things you are interested in, like your hobbies or seeing friends. This can help keep your mind off negative thoughts and habits.
- Learn as much as you can about eating disorders. There are lots of books on the subject, and sources of useful information online (see the list included in this leaflet).
- It can be helpful to know that you're not alone. You can find support groups online - BEAT, the eating disorder charity, run online communities for all ages and for carers and families.



## Tips for families, partners and carers

- If someone you care about confides in you about their eating disorder, try not to get angry or upset with them. It can be very hard to ask for help so be supportive and try to understand.
- Ask your loved one what they do and don't find helpful, as everyone is different.
- Try and keep them included in social activities, even if they don't always take up the invitation.
- Avoid making comments about weight or looking 'healthier'.
- Patience is very important. A person with an eating disorder might not always be open to help. This can be difficult to deal with, but remember it's the illness talking, not the person.

## Useful websites

### **BEAT**

The UK's leading eating disorders charity. BEAT offer online support groups, helplines and a library of downloadable information leaflets.

[b-eat.co.uk](http://b-eat.co.uk)

### **Mind**

Information and support along with downloadable leaflets and real people's stories. Search 'eating disorders' from the homepage.

[mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

### **NHS Choices**

Online resources including advice for parents and friends on how to support someone who has an eating disorder.

[nhs.uk/eatingdisorders](http://nhs.uk/eatingdisorders)

# Help with our eating disorders research

We are working to better understand mental health problems including eating disorders. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment and support for the future.

But to do this we need **your** help.

Helping with our research is easy - it involves completing an online survey which should take around 10-15 minutes to complete. It asks questions about your:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To take part, visit [www.ncmh.info/help](http://www.ncmh.info/help) or contact us:



**info@ncmh.info**



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Produced by the National Centre for Mental Health.

The information in this leaflet is correct at the time of printing. Printed February 2018.

NCMH is funded by Welsh Government through Health and Care Research Wales.

Mae'r wybodaeth hon hefyd ar gael drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg. I ofyn am gopi, cysylltwch â ni: [info@ncmh.info](mailto:info@ncmh.info)



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