

Eating Disorders

The term "eating disorders" encompasses a group of problems that fall into two broad categories—overeating (binging), and under eating (anorexia)—sometimes referred to as "starving or stuffing." Eating disorders are most commonly found in young females during early adolescence. However, eating disorders affect both males and females at many stages in the life cycle. Although the conditions create physical problems, the causes are usually psychological.

Eating disorders have been recognized by health experts for many years. Bulimia symptoms were described by the Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks; and anorexia nervosa was first described in the 1600s. However, it was not until 1980 that these conditions were categorized as psychiatric disturbances.

Eating disorders are marked by extreme dissatisfaction and preoccupation with body size and shape. People with these disorders may see themselves as overweight when their weight is actually lower than normal, or they may measure their self-worth by their weight.

Emotional disturbance accompanies disordered eating, including self-loathing over amounts eaten or panic about

possible weight gain. In addition to overeating or under eating, individuals with eating disorders engage in "compensatory behaviours," such as purging (self-induced vomiting or inappropriate use of laxatives, enemas, or diuretics), fasting, excessive exercise, and restricting (overly strict limiting of calories or food types).

Eating disorders can be distinguished from dieting by the psychological distress that accompanies the concern about weight; by the interference with everyday responsibilities and pleasures; and by the danger of causing medical problems, possibly even death.

Shame and secrecy often accompany eating disorders, and the problem may go undetected for years. Recognition of these disorders is necessary to begin the long process of treatment. Unlike other addictive or habit problems, food cannot be avoided, and recovery

requires developing a healthier relationship to food and to one's own body, as well as improved coping skills.