

What is an Eating Disorder and How do I Recognize the Warning Signs?

Anorexia Nervosa

A disorder characterized by an obsession with dieting and thinness and an intense fear of fat, eventually leading to dangerously excessive weight loss. Many anorexics, despite a perilously thin body, see themselves as overweight. Statistics show that one percent of American teenagers will develop Anorexia Nervosa and up to 10 percent of these young women may die from the disease.

Warning Signs:

- Significant and/or rapid loss of body weight
- An obsession with dieting in spite of a thin frame
- An intense fear of gaining weight
- Amenorrhea (loss of menstrual cycle)
- Unexplained hair loss
- Cold or clammy hands and feet
- Compulsive exercise habits, sometimes in a secretive fashion
- Lying about food intake
- Unexplained fainting
- Appearance of body hair on extremities and other body parts
- Dry skin
- Periods of hyperactivity quickly followed by bouts of depression and anxiety

Potential Complications

- Bone deterioration and loss
- Organ damage (specifically shrunken organs)
- Low blood pressure and body temperature and the inability to regulate it
- Slow reflexes
- Cardiac arrest
- Death

Bulimia Nervosa

A disorder characterized by frequent episodes of binge eating followed by self-induced purging, often with the aid of laxatives, diuretics, or vomiting-inducing drugs, to rid the body of the food. Bulimics may not always appear thin like their anorexic counterparts. Statistics suggest up to five percent of American college women suffer from Bulimia.

Warning Signs:

- Eating large amounts of food uncontrollably
- Abuse of laxatives or diuretics in a weight loss effort
- Mood swings and/or depression
- Shortness of breath, even after light activity
- Making frequent trips to the bathroom after eating
- A noticeable swelling and/or bloating, particularly in the glands of the neck and face
- Visible tooth decay or dental problems, particularly in the front teeth
- Bloodshot eyes or light bruising around upper cheek area
- Irregular menstrual periods

- Insomnia
- Hiding food in peculiar places

Potential Complications:

- Bowel, liver and kidney damage
- Irregular heartbeat
- Severe dehydration that often requires hospitalization
- Cardiac arrest

Is My Child at Risk?

Jean Bradley Rubel, Th.D., president of Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc. (ANRED), explains some of the factors that may contribute to eating disorders:

- **Biological Factors** – Some personality types (obsessive-compulsive and sensitive-avoidant, for example) are more vulnerable to eating disorders than others. New research suggests that abnormal levels of brain chemicals predispose some people to anxiety, perfectionism, and obsessive-compulsive thoughts and behaviors.
- **Psychological Factors** – People with eating disorders tend to be perfectionists. They may have unrealistic expectations of themselves and others. In spite of their many achievements, they feel inadequate, defective, and worthless. [To them,] everything is either good or bad, a success or a failure, fat or thin. If fat is bad and thin is good, then thinner is better and thinnest is best – even if thinnest is 68 pounds in a hospital bed on life support.
- **Family Factors** – Some people with eating disorders say they feel smothered in their families. Others feel abandoned, misunderstood, and alone. Parents who overvalue physical appearance can unwittingly contribute to an eating disorder—so can those who make critical comments, even in jest, about their children’s bodies.
- **Social Factors** – TV, movies, and magazines are three examples of media that flood people with messages about the “advantages” of being thin. Impressionable readers and viewers are told, directly and indirectly by the actors and models who are chosen for display, that goodness, success, power, approval, popularity, admiration, intelligence, friends, and romantic relationships all require physical beauty in general and thinness in particular. Never before in recorded history have females been exhorted to be as thin as is currently fashionable.
- **Triggers** – Triggers often happen at times of transition when increased demands are made on people who are unsure of their ability to meet expectations. Such triggers includes starting a new school, beginning a new job, death, divorce, marriage, family problems, graduation into a chaotic, competitive world, and so forth. Perhaps the most common trigger of disordered eating is dieting.