

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are mental health problems that involve out-of-the-ordinary eating behaviour. This can include eating too little or too much or becoming fixated with weight or body shape. They can be serious and life-threatening and can affect all areas of someone's life.

Eating disorders aren't a lifestyle choice or a diet gone wrong, and anyone of any gender, age or cultural background can experience one.

People who have poor or negative body image are more vulnerable to developing an eating disorder. It can also play a role in how you start thinking and acting when it comes to what you eat and how much you might exercise.¹ There is also constant pressure to appear a certain way from Australian culture and society, which can be hard to avoid. This might be particularly difficult if you don't fit with what society tells us is an 'ideal' body type.

Eating disorders are not only about food. The behaviours that go with them may be a coping mechanism or a way to feel in control. Eating disorders often co-occur with anxiety, panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, as well as with harmful substance use. More information about anxiety is available in the Anxiety Factsheet.

There are several types of eating disorders. Three common ones in Australia are:

Binge eating Disorder - This is when someone eats excessively in a short period of time in an out-of-control way and feels compelled to do so on a regular basis.

Bulimia nervosa - This is when someone is caught in an unhealthy eating cycle of binge eating then vomiting, fasting, exercising too much or taking laxatives to make up for their overeating.

Anorexia nervosa - This is when someone tries to keep their body weight as low as possible by not eating enough and/or exercising excessively. They may have a distorted view of their body and think they are larger than they are.

Other Specified Eating and Feeding Disorders - this is when you might have some of the symptoms of other eating disorders, and have very unhelpful eating behaviours and thoughts about your body.

Symptoms:

Symptoms of eating disorders will vary between individuals and type of eating disorder. Not matching the symptoms exactly does not mean that someone does not have an eating disorder, however, some common symptoms include:

- Eating very little food or eating large amounts of food in a short time in an uncontrolled way
- Having very strict habits, rituals, or routines around food
- Spending a lot of time worrying about your body weight and shape
- Changes in mood
- Deliberately making yourself vomit after eating
- Avoiding socialising when food may be involved
- Withdrawing from social groups, hobbies you used to enjoy, or from family life
- Physical signs such as digestive problems or weight being very high or low for someone's age and height

Causes:

Eating disorders are complex mental health problems that can be caused by a combination of things. This can include genetics, changes in hormones, and psychological or social factors such as a lack of confidence or self-esteem, seeking perfection, problems such as bullying, or difficulties with school or work.

The clash between cultures can increase the risk for body dissatisfaction or an eating disorder. Other risk factors for people from CALD backgrounds include:

- Prolonged exposure to Western ideals of shape and size can lead to low self-esteem and increased risk of developing an eating disorder.
- The stress of migration and trying to fit in to a new culture can contribute to the development of disordered eating.

¹ [Body image disorders - Butterfly Foundation](https://butterfly.org.au/body-image/can-body-image-issues-be-serious/body-image-disorders/) - <https://butterfly.org.au/body-image/can-body-image-issues-be-serious/body-image-disorders/>



- Cultural and political refugees experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder are at risk of developing an eating disorder.²

Getting support:

Eating disorders can be effectively treated. Early intervention improves the outcome of recovery in all eating disorders. Recovery can take months or years, but the majority of people recover.

If you are worried you or a loved one may have an eating problem, please contact your doctor. Your doctor may not be an expert in treating eating disorders, but they will be able to assess symptoms resulting from your eating disorder and can then refer you to specialist eating disorder service.

Treatment:

There are a range of approaches for the treatment and management of eating disorders and the most appropriate method will vary depending on the type and severity of the eating disorder, and the personal circumstances and preferences of the person receiving support.

Treatment may include:

- Talking therapies to work through your thoughts, feelings and behaviours with a mental health professional in regular sessions over a set period of time.
- Dietary education with a dietitian to assist with balanced and mindful eating habits.
- Medications may be used to reduce feelings of depression and anxiety along with talk therapy.

² [People from multicultural communities - Butterfly Foundation](https://butterfly.org.au/eating-disorders/who-does-it-affect/people-from-multicultural-communities/) - <https://butterfly.org.au/eating-disorders/who-does-it-affect/people-from-multicultural-communities/>

About this factsheet:

This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental health requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own, or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, please always seek medical advice.

Sources

Butterfly Foundation - Body image disorders - Butterfly Foundation -

<https://butterfly.org.au/body-image/can-body-image-issues-be-serious/body-image-disorders/>

Butterfly Foundation - People from multicultural communities - Butterfly Foundation -

<https://butterfly.org.au/eating-disorders/who-does-it-affect/people-from-multicultural-communities/>

- Your doctor may conduct an X-ray to check the health of your bones as being underweight for a long period of time can lead to low bone strength.
- Hospitalisation may be required for those at medical risk.

Family members and friends of people with an eating disorder can often feel confused and distressed.

Support and education, as well as better community understanding, are an important part of treatment.

Your doctor is a good place to start when seeking mental health help. The factsheet in this series *Getting professional Mental Health Help* has more information on seeking professional help.

You can also contact the Butterfly National Helpline. The Butterfly Foundation is the national charity for all Australians impacted by eating disorders and body image issues, and for the families, friends and communities who support them. They can provide information, referrals to health professionals and counselling. Contact:

[Butterfly.org.au](https://butterfly.org.au)

For translation services: call 131 450 and ask to be connected to Butterfly Foundation's Helpline

Webchat and email service also available

If you need help now

If you think someone could hurt themselves or others, get urgent help.

Call emergency services

Dial triple zero (000)

Call Lifeline

Dial 13 11 14

Mental Health Foundation UK. – Eating disorders - <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/e/eating-disorders>

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