FACT SHEET

EATING DISORDERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, FAMILY AND FRIENDS

AT A GLANCE

- Understand eating disorders and how they affect young people
- Understand how to support a young person presenting with eating difficulties
- Understand when and how to seek help

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Eating disorders is the name given to a group of mental health conditions that are related to 'disordered' or unhelpful eating patterns. They can include extreme restriction of food, feeling out of control of food intake, and overeating. They often happen when someone is dissatisfied with their body size, looks or shape, but can also be linked to other experiences such as trauma, sensory sensitivities, or distress related to gender identity.

Most people who experience an eating disorder will typically first experience it during their adolescence. Eating disorders tend to be more common in females, however they can happen to anyone of any gender.

While eating disorders are serious and can be life-threatening, there are effective treatments and supports available.

HOW DO EATING DISORDERS AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE?

While all eating disorders involve changes in eating behaviour and a focus on food, weight, or body shape, they differ in their specific characteristics. Many people will move from one eating disorder diagnosis to another over their lifetime, or they may not always fit neatly into one category.

This table outlines the different eating disorder diagnoses.

EATING DISORDER DIAGNOSES

DIAGNOSIS	CHARACTERISTICS
Anorexia nervosa	Young people experiencing anorexia nervosa may limit their food intake or undertake behaviours to try to counteract eating (purging), which can lead to very low and unsafe body weight. They often struggle with strong fears of weight gain and may see their body in a negative or distorted way. The average age of onset is 16-17 years, but it may also begin at a younger age. (1)
Bulimia nervosa	Bulimia nervous describes a pattern where people experience episodes of feeling their eating becomes out of control (binging) followed by behaviours designed to counteract what they have eaten (purging). People experiencing bulimia nervosa can have a variety of body shapes and may not appear underweight. Like anorexia nervosa, they typically experience severe dissatisfaction with their body and judge their overall worth based on their weight or body shape.
Binge eating disorder	Binge eating disorder describes experiencing episodes of having a sense of no control over what or how they eat (binging), but without undertaking the behaviours designed to counteract binges seen in bulimia.
Avoidant/ restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)	ARFID describes when a person is unable to meet their nutritional and/or energy requirements due to their eating patterns. Unlike anorexia nervosa or bulimia, their restricted eating patterns are not related to body image concerns but may be related to a range of factors such as sensory discomfort, differences in awareness around hunger cues, or concerns about food such as vomiting. Some research suggests that neurodivergent young people may be more likely to experience ARFID. (2)
Other specified feeding or eating disorder	Mental health professionals will often use this description when someone has some of the signs of an eating disorder but does not meet all of the requirements for a diagnosis. For example, this could include when someone is binging and undertaking behaviours to counteract their purging but it is unrelated to concerns about their body weight.
Unspecified feeding or eating disorder	Unspecified feeding or eating disorder is characterised by many symptoms of another eating disorder but the full diagnosis criteria is not met. This category is used as a diagnosis in situations where the clinician chooses not to specify the reason why another eating disorder was not met, including when there is not enough information for a more specific diagnosis.

Young people with an eating disorder may also experience a range of other mental health difficulties, including depression, anxiety or substance use(3). A young person with an eating disorder may go to great lengths to hide, disguise or deny their behaviour, or may not recognise that there is anything wrong. This can result in a delay in getting treatment, which increases the chances of problems with long-term health, mental health or relationships. Getting the right support can assist with recovery and planning for getting on with education, work and relationships.

WHAT TREATMENTS ARE HELPFUL?

There are effective treatments to help young people who experience eating disorders. The type of treatment will depend on the type of disorder. One of the most commonly used treatments is cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT explores thinking patterns and how they affect our behaviour and emotions(4). There are other psychological treatments for eating disorders, including family approaches for adolescents or young people who are experiencing an eating disorder(5). In certain instances, medication may also be helpful. If a young person does need medical treatment, there are health professionals and treatment programs that specialise in eating disorders.

Medical teams should be involved in the treatment of eating disorders because these disorders can lead to serious physical health issues, psychological distress and emotional and relationship problems. Starvation, repeated cycles of binge eating and purging or fasting can lead to major chemical changes in the body as well as damage to vital organs. For those with low weight, weight restoration may be an important part of treatment.

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ADVICE AND REFERRAL

If someone you know has an eating disorder, let them know you're there to support them and, if needed, encourage them to get professional support.

Young people should be encouraged and supported to talk about their concerns and difficulties with someone they trust. This might be a school counsellor, family friend, a parent, teacher or other support. As an initial step, a GP can help to identify what is and isn't an eating disorder, and help with a plan for addressing concerns. For some eating disorders, GPs can support young people to access a Medicare Eating Disorder Care Plan, which provides subsidised access to 40 sessions with a mental health clinician and 20 sessions with a dietician over a 12-month period(6).

Young people may prefer to seek help through local headspace centres or other community mental health options. You often do not need a GP referral to access these services.

Ask family and friends to support you to eat in a healthy and balanced way. Stay connected to the things that you enjoy doing and your social supports.

GETTING HELP

If you or someone you know experience symptoms of an eating or body image disorder, you can use these tips to start seeking help.

- Talk to someone you trust. Tell family or friends about what you're feeling and thinking so they can support you.
- Ask family and friends to support you to eat in a healthy and balanced way.
- Find ways to relax by doing things you enjoy, such as listening to music, reading or other hobbies.
- Avoid or try to reduce use of alcohol and drugs as they often make the situation worse over time and can lead to other problems, such as dependency.
- Do some research to understand your treatment and recovery options. It may be useful to seek professional help from a counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist or doctor.

Family and other supports play a key role for accessing help, treatment, and in recovery. Families can support by coming to appointments with you or by providing practical support like driving you to your appointments.

RELATED RESOURCES

- Clinical practice point. Working with young people experiencing eating disorders. Melbourne: Orygen; 2026.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information regarding mental health, or for information in other languages, visit:

- headspace www.headspace.org.au
- Butterfly Foundation https://butterfly.org.au/
- National Eating Disorders Collaboration www.nedc.com.au
- Eating Disorders Victoria www.eatingdisorders.org.au
- Inside Out Institute https://insideoutinstitute.org.au/
- ReachOut Australia www.reachout.com
- Beyond Blue www.beyondblue.org.au
- Better Health Channel www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Sane www.sane.org
- Health Direct www.healthdirect.gov.au

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Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to their Country, which continue to be important to First Nations people living today.

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