

Eating Disorders



Are you constantly preoccupied with your weight and body image?

Do you feel that your eating is getting out of your control?

Are you using extreme methods, such as self-induced vomiting, over-exercising or laxatives to control your weight?

If so, you may suffer from an eating disorder...



What are Eating Disorders?



Eating disorders are medical and mental illnesses characterized by a persistent disturbance of a person's eating or eating-related behavior that significantly impair physical health or psychosocial functioning. Obsessions with food, body weight and shape are some of the major signs of eating disorders. The most common types of eating disorders include **anorexia nervosa (AN)**, **bulimia nervosa (BN)**, and **binge-eating disorder**. Eating disorders are serious but treatable illnesses. They affect people of all ages, sexes, races and socioeconomic groups.

Different Types of Eating Disorders



Anorexia Nervosa (AN)

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by distorted body image, excessive dieting, severe weight loss and a pathological fear of becoming fat. It primarily affects adolescent girls and young women. They may see themselves as overweight, even when they are seriously underweight. They would severely avoid food, restrict food or eat less than they need. The semi-starvation in anorexia nervosa can cause potentially life-threatening medical conditions, such as brain damage, multi-organ failure, bone loss, heart difficulties, and infertility due to the danger of underweight.

There are two subtypes of anorexia nervosa: a restrictive type and a binge-eating/purge type.

Restrictive type: People with the restrictive subtype of anorexia nervosa place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they consume. Their weight loss is accomplished primarily through dieting, fasting, and/or excessive exercise.

Binge-eating/purge type: In addition to the restrictions on the amount and type of food, people with the binge-eating/purge subtype of anorexia nervosa may have binge eating (i.e., uncontrollably eating an excessive amount of food in a short period of time) and purging behaviors (i.e., self-induced vomiting). They will often purge after eating because they want to alleviate the guilt of having forbidden food and the fear of gaining weight. The compensatory behaviors may also include excessive exercises or the misuse of laxatives.

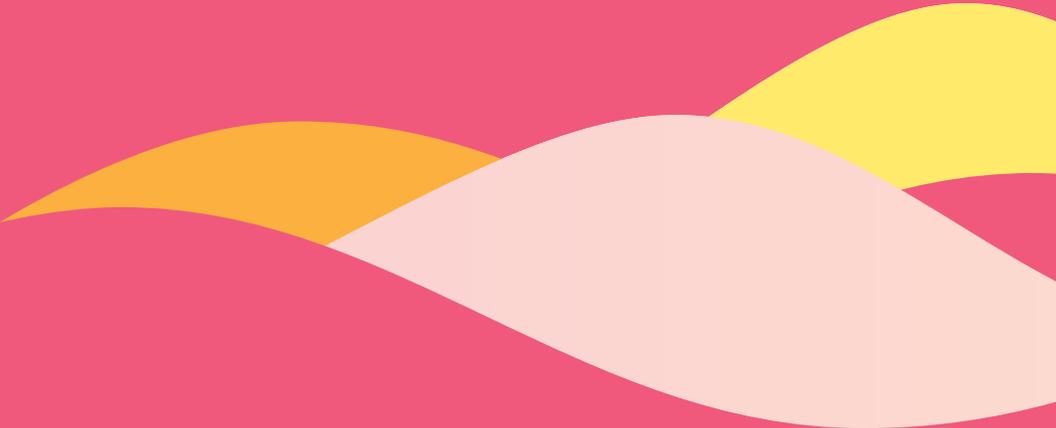
Symptom

- Extreme and persistent food intake restriction that leads to extreme thinness (i.e., less than minimally normal level for age, sex and physical health).
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat.
- Persistent pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy weight.
- Self-esteem is highly dependent on the perception of body weight and shape.
- Weight loss is perceived as an impressive achievement and self-discipline, whereas weight gain is perceived as an unacceptable failure of self-control.
- Distorted self-perception of body weight and shape.
- Frequently weighs or obsessively measures the body parts.
- Usually lacking insight about the seriousness of their weight loss.

Bulimia Nervosa (BN)

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by recurrent episodes of uncontrollable binge eating. Binge eating is usually followed by compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting and excessive exercise to avoid weight gain. Unlike people with anorexia nervosa, people with bulimia nervosa may maintain a normal weight or may be overweight.

Symptom

- Recurrent episodes of binge eating (i.e., eating in a discrete period of time, usually less than 2 hours, an amount of food that is much larger than most individuals would eat under similar circumstances).
 - A sense of lack of control over eating, such as being unable to refrain from eating or stop eating once started, even when feeling uncomfortably full.
 - Recurrent inappropriate compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain, such as purging (i.e., self-induced vomiting), fasting, using laxative and doing exercises excessively.
 - Feeling ashamed of having eating problems. Attempts to conceal the symptoms such as eating in secret.
 - Avoidance in eating with others and feeling uncomfortable when eating around others.
 - Extreme fear of gaining weight.
 - Dissatisfaction over body weight and shape.
 - Excessive emphasis on body shape or weight in self-evaluation.
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Binge-Eating Disorder

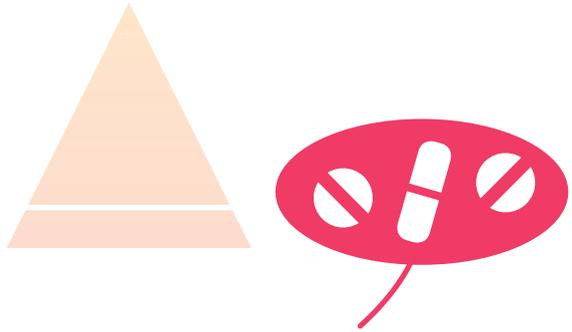
Binge-eating disorder is defined as recurring episodes of uncontrollable binge eating. People with binge-eating disorder may eat large amounts of food even when not feeling hungry. It is usually associated with the feeling of guilt, embarrassment, and disgusted with oneself. Unlike bulimia nervosa, people with binge-eating disorder do not use compensatory behaviors after bingeing, and thus are often overweight or obese.

Symptom

- Recurrent episodes of binge eating (i.e., eating in a discrete period of time, usually less than 2 hours, an amount of food that is much larger than most individuals would eat under similar circumstances).
 - Having a sense of lack of control over eating, such as inability to refrain from eating or stop eating once started, even when feeling uncomfortably full.
 - Eating even when not hungry.
 - Eating fast during binge episodes.
 - Eating until uncomfortably full.
 - Eating alone or in secret to avoid embarrassment.
 - Feeling distressed, ashamed, or guilty about eating afterwards.
 - Binge eating is not associated with the recurrent use of inappropriate compensatory behavior such as fasting, purging, doing excessive exercise or using laxatives.
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What causes Eating Disorders?

- There is no single cause of eating disorders. Usually, it is a combination of environmental and biological factors that contribute to the development of eating disorders.
- Studies found that people with eating disorders are having a distorted body and self-image, possessing a perfectionistic personality trait, thinking in a dichotomous way, being harsh and setting a very high standard to themselves.
- Eating problems can be related to traumatic or stressful events, family problems, social and media influences and brain chemical imbalance.
- Studies also found that having negative mood and high level of stress would be the risk factors and triggers of eating disorders.
- The reasons of having eating disorder vary and thus it is important to seek professional help if you notice some signs of eating problems.



Are Eating Disorders Treatable?

Early intervention for eating disorders is very important. As everyone's experience and the causes of eating disorders can be very different, it is vital to talk to professionals to choose the appropriate treatment plan for you. Treatment options include psychotherapy (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), psychotropic medications to treat underlying factors (such as depression or anxiety), nutritional counseling, medical care and monitoring, or a combination of these approaches. Typical treatment goals include resuming adequate nutrition, restoring healthy weight level, stopping unhealthy compensatory behaviors of binge-purge and excessive exercise behaviors. Full recovery is possible.





Support and Self-help

Eating disorders can significantly interfere with and disrupt the lives of the affected person. In addition to seeking professional treatment, social support is crucial for a person's recovery. So, talk to people you trust, such as your family, teachers or friends. Recovering from an eating disorder is not an easy task and it takes time. Try to be understanding and accepting towards the progress of recovery, even when there may be setbacks during the course of recovery. Engage yourself in something that you are interested in, keep connecting with your friends and family. Be kind to yourself. Relaxation and mindfulness practice also help improving your mental well-being.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.

American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/eating>

Hong Kong Eating Disorders Association Limited

<http://www.heda-hk.org/>

Hong Kong Eating Disorders Center

<http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/med/hedc/>

Mayo Clinic

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/eating-disorders/symptoms-causes/syc-20353603>

Mind.org.hk

<http://www.mind.org.hk/mental-health-a-to-z/eating-disorders/about-eating-problems/>

National Care for Mental Health

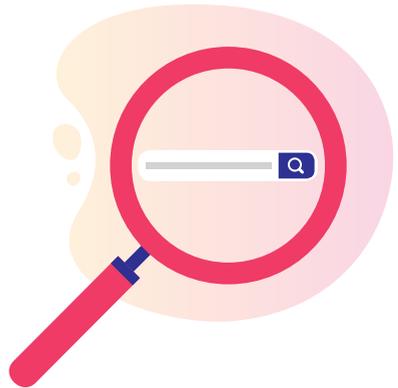
<https://www.ncmh.info/conditions-we-study/eating-disorders/>

National Eating Disorder Association

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>

National Institute of Mental Health

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/eating-disorders/index.shtml>



Professional Help-seeking

The University provides counseling services for undergraduate and postgraduate students. You may check out Counselors' profiles on our webpage and make an online appointment with us. Three weeks' advance reservation is allowed. All personal information and details shared and discussed in counseling or therapy sessions are strictly confidential.

Counseling and Wellness Center

🏠 Room 5003 (via lift 3) ☎ (852) 2358 6696
🌐 <http://counsel.ust.hk> ✉ counsel@ust.hk

24/7 HEARing ☎ (852) 8208 2688

This is a 24-hour helpline that supports exclusively all HKUST students 7 days a week. The service is made available by our Counselors in collaboration with the Christian Family Service Center.



Meet Our Counselors