

# Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating: What Are the Differences?

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Eating disorders and disordered eating are increasing rapidly among children, adolescents and young adults. However, we have ways to recognize these disorders and ways to get help.

## What is an eating disorder?

Eating disorders involve extreme eating behaviors, such as eating too much or too little. Eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder and obesity.

Anorexia is described as self-starvation with a loss of about 15 percent of body weight and an intense fear of becoming fat. Most people suffering from anorexia believe they are fat, even when they are not. Bulimia often is characterized by bingeing (eating large amounts of food) and purging (throwing up) as well as a strong fear of becoming fat. Binge eating disorder is slightly different from bulimia in that only bingeing behaviors are present, meaning that individuals tend to eat large amounts of food quickly. Obesity is when a person weighs 20 percent or more above the body weight that is typical for his or her age and size.

Eating disorders are particularly common among adolescents and young adults between the ages of 10 and 25. Although eating disorders are more common among girls than boys, between 5 and 15 percent of anorexia and bulimia cases are boys and approximately 35 to 40 percent of binge eating disorder cases are boys. Girls and boys are equally likely to be obese, with rates of obesity nearly tripling in the past 30 years.

Eating disorders often do not have one single cause. They may be a result of a number of environmental or genetic factors. Some research suggests that eating disorders can run in families or involve a chemical problem in the brain. Other research points to psychological components, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety or perceived lack of control over personal matters. Eating disorders also may be the result of social influences, including parents, friends

and the news media. Parents and friends should avoid teasing about weight, promoting the thin ideal body type, discussing dieting and providing unhealthy food options.

If you suspect that someone you know or love has an eating disorder, getting that person help immediately is essential.

## What is disordered eating?

Disordered eating is any irregular or unhealthy eating behavior and attitude. It is a precursor for eating disorders, meaning that disordered eating patterns can lead to a full-blown eating disorder. Therefore, recognizing the signs of disordered eating and encouraging healthy eating and body image is important.

Disordered eating may include body image dissatisfaction, dieting behaviors, excessive exercising and fat talk (making statements to others such as “I look fat in these clothes” or “I am so fat”). Sadly, the majority of girls and young women report being dissatisfied with their bodies, engaging in dieting and talking to their friends about being fat. Boys and young men also often report dissatisfaction with their bodies and tend to want to become more muscular.

If you suspect that someone you know or love has symptoms of disordered eating, make sure this person makes good food choices, maintains a positive body image and exercises in a healthy manner.

For information about eating disorders, visit the National Eating Disorders Association  
Web site: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org).