



# **Eating Difficulties – Getting Support**

# What are eating difficulties?

In western societies, many of us have enough to eat so our relationship with food is no longer simply about survival. Our personal relationship with food starts when we are babies. Family, and social interactions often take place in the context of eating. In this way, food takes on a wealth of social and personal meanings.

For most people, eating is a pleasurable activity. However, we are constantly bombarded with images of food, eating and ideal body shapes that complicate our relationship with food and with our bodies. It is not surprising that many people run into problems with eating too much or too little or feel unhappy with their bodies. Many people worry about their appearance and most people have been on a diet or have wanted to change their body shape at some time.

For some these concerns can lead them to develop eating difficulties.

It is helpful to understand our eating habits as a continuum or spectrum of behaviours. At either end are disruptive, unhealthy, unhappy eating patterns such as excessively restricting or measuring intake, compulsive eating, and purging behaviours. In the middle of the continuum are sufficiently healthy, enjoyable eating habits, where most people find themselves most of the time.

Sometimes people restrict their eating to the extent that they maintain an extremely low body weight or lose weight dramatically, compared with the standard body weight for their height and age. The person might believe that they are fat however thin they appear to others. They sometimes wear baggy clothing to disguise weight loss and to avoid comment. They might restrict themselves to a vegetarian, vegan, low fat, low calorie or detoxification diet or self-impose periods of self-starvation. They may be preoccupied with exercise and running.

**These eating habits may cause serious health problems, including:**

- Irregular or missed periods in young women
- Loss of sexual interest and impotence in young men
- Low blood pressure causing dizziness and fainting
- Heart, bowel and kidney problems
- Fits or seizures
- Low bone density, leading to brittle bones, osteoporosis or interrupted growth

**Eating difficulties can be detrimental to a person's psychological health and may be a factor related to: -**

- Disrupted sleep

- Anxiety
- Poor concentration and motivation, which may affect work or study
- Depression
- Self-harm
- Fatigue

**Symptoms caused by restricting eating may include:**

- Extremely low body weight
- Distorted body image
- Fear of getting fat

**People with a more severe problem may experience:**

- Hair loss and growth of downy hair on arms and face
- Loss of muscle on legs and arms, with swollen joints
- Protruding eyes
- Low body temperature and constantly feeling cold

**Binge eating and overeating** may follow a period of self-denial, or dieting, or simply 'trying to be good.' Binges are often experienced as a loss of control and may be accompanied by feelings of anxiety, guilt, or distress.

The urge to eat to excess may be followed by a desire to purge oneself by vomiting or using laxatives. Frequent vomiting can damage a person's teeth and the regular use of laxatives may cause bowel problems.

The signs of binge eating, and purging might be less obvious, as the person's weight may remain within the normal range, but their housemates or friends may notice:

- Food going missing
- Always using the toilet after meals
- Eating secretly and hiding food
- Changes in appearance

**What causes eating difficulties?**

Eating difficulties often become more noticeable in adolescence, although children sometimes express distress by refusing to eat or by comfort eating. Everyone has different attitudes to food, and to their bodies, and the reasons will vary from person to person. Examples of issues that may contribute to eating difficulties for some people include:

**A need for control.** A strict dietary regime can feel very reassuring when life seems chaotic or out of control. Because of this, it can be tempting to try to control one's eating at times of stress or change.

If someone feels helpless and unable to have any control over their life, one thing they may be able to take charge of is how much they eat. Saying "no" to food (going on hunger strike) can be a way of rejecting the control of others, taking control over one aspect of life, or even gaining control over those around them.

**Achievement and approval.** High achievers and perfectionists are vulnerable to developing eating disorders. They may set impossibly high targets and expect a lot of themselves and others. Restricting food intake can be a way of achieving a target that is within their control and a means of gaining approval from others or feeling as though they fit in with their peer group.

Body shape is determined through a complex interaction of variables including genetics. Current ideals of body images in westernised culture - as presented by the fitness and diet industry and by the media - do not convey the reality and variety of real lives, and the diversity of what is attractive.

**Comfort eating.** We often talk of being "starved of affection" and there is a close connection between being fed and feeling loved and cared for. When we feel "empty inside", it might feel as though food can fill the emptiness, particularly foods with strong emotional associations such as desserts or foods that require little effort such as takeaways. Some foods such as chocolate or snacks might be appealing as they produce a temporary carb "rush" that lifts our mood.

## **How can you help yourself?**

- If you recognise some of the difficulties described in this leaflet you have already taken a big step forward, as it can be extremely hard to recognise and accept that you have eating difficulties.
- Talking to family or friends may be helpful. They may have noticed that something is wrong, and it may be a relief for them to know what is happening and for you to have finally told them.
- When you are ready to act, it is more helpful to learn to manage your own food intake than to let friends or family attempt to control your eating.
- If you are significantly underweight, you may have lost the ability to judge what an adequate amount of food looks like, and you may need professional help to regain some weight.

- Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your tutor or a member of support staff. They will signpost you to specialist services if necessary.
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, you can talk to your personal tutor, or someone in the Support and Wellbeing team for your school so that they can help with arrangements for coursework or exams, practical support and negotiating academic issues.
- It may be helpful to seek advice and support from someone who is not directly involved in your life. A link to resources is at the end of this leaflet.

## How can you help someone else?

- Often the most helpful thing you can do is listen. Try not to engage in lengthy discussions about calories or the person's weight, as that may reinforce unhelpful beliefs.
- Be honest about how you feel about the person's eating difficulty. You may have to be very patient, as they may not be ready to change their eating behaviour, even though they may know it is harmful. There is little point in trying to persuade someone to eat, or to lose weight, until they are ready to make the change.
- Encourage the person to get some support and help by talking to a counsellor or to their GP.
- Do not try to control the other person's eating. It is likely to lead to conflict and they may simply hide their behaviour more carefully.
- Encourage them to engage in conversation about everyday things and to participate in their usual day-to-day activities.
- If you think the person is at risk, see the urgent support link below or the local and national resources at the end of this leaflet. [Emergencies](#)
- Living with a person who has an eating difficulty can be challenging and frustrating. You may want some support for yourself, or simply a place to talk in confidence. The University Counselling Service is available to students and staff who need this kind of support.

## **When is specialist help appropriate?**

Many people may restrict their food intake or comfort eat to relieve anxiety or distress, particularly at times of stress such as exams. If, however, this has become a regular pattern, or if your eating habits are causing concern for you or the people who care about you, it might be helpful to talk about it with someone that you trust, or a professional support service

Eating difficulties can cause physical and psychological health problems. Changing eating behaviours, particularly long-standing ones, can take a while, with setbacks along the way, and it is often helpful to have support with this.

Your GP has knowledge and experience with these difficulties and can be a source of support, as well as offering help, advice, and treatment if necessary. Those people with more serious problems may need a referral to a dietician or to an eating disorders service. Your GP can arrange this for you.

The University Counselling Service is another source of help and support. It can be helpful to talk to someone who is not directly involved in your daily life, a Counselling Consultation may help you start to understand better what is happening, and to consider what further options for specialist support might be appropriate for you.