Eating Disorders

I think THIN but I eat FAT.

HELP IS AT HAND - Information for the general public

The Royal College of Psychiatrists
About this leaflet

This leaflet is for anyone who has anorexia or bulimia, or who feels that their eating or dieting is getting out of control. It should also be helpful for anyone with a friend or relative, son or daughter, who is having a problem of this sort. It does not deal with the problems of being overweight.

Introduction

We all eat differently. Some of us eat more, some of us eat less. Some of us put on weight easily, some of us do not. However, if we have an eating disorder, we damage our health by:

- eating too much
- eating too little
- using harmful ways to get rid of calories.

This leaflet deals with two eating disorders - anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.
Who gets eating disorders?
Girls and women are 10 times more likely than boys and men to suffer from anorexia or bulimia. Boys and men do, though, seem to be getting eating disorders more often.

Symptoms
People with anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa share an intense fear of becoming fat. If you have an eating disorder, your symptoms may not fit neatly into the description either of anorexia or of bulimia. Your symptoms may:
- be a mixture of anorexia and bulimia
- change over time - you can develop the symptoms of bulimia after a period of anorexia nervosa.

Anorexia Nervosa
What are the signs?
You may find yourself:
- more and more worried that you are fat or frightened that you will get fat
- eating less and less
- exercising more and more, to burn off calories and to keep your weight down
- smoking more or chewing gum to keep your weight down
- losing interest in sex
- girls or women - irregular or stopped monthly menstrual periods
- men or boys - loss of erections and wet dreams, and shrinkage of the genitals back to the size they were before puberty.

When does it start?
Anorexia nervosa usually starts in the teenage years. It affects around:
- 1 fifteen year-old girl in every 150
- 1 fifteen year-old boy in every 1000
However, it can start in childhood, or later, in the 20s or 30s, or even later in life.

How does it start?
Anorexia can begin with the everyday dieting that many of us try from time to time. About a third of people with anorexia have been overweight before they start to diet. Normally when you diet, it is a relief to stop when you get to the weight you want. In anorexia, you can’t stop. You find yourself dieting and losing weight until you are well below the normal limit for your age and height.

What happens?
- You eat very few calories every day. You stick to fruit, vegetables and salads and can appear to be eating healthily. However, the amount you eat doesn’t have enough energy for your body’s needs - you starve yourself.
- You may also exercise, use slimming pills, or smoke more to keep your weight down.
- Although you don’t want to eat yourself, you may find yourself buying food and cooking for other people.
- You still get as hungry as ever.
- You become more afraid of putting on weight, and more determined to keep your weight well below normal.
- As time goes on, you may also develop some of the symptoms of bulimia. If this happens, you will find yourself making yourself sick, or using laxatives to try to control your weight. Unlike someone with bulimia nervosa, your weight may continue to be very low.
Bulimia Nervosa
What are the signs?
You may find yourself:
- more and more worried, or frightened, that you are fat or will get fat
- binge eating (see overleaf)
- staying a normal weight, in spite of your efforts to diet
- having irregular menstrual periods
- feeling tired
- making yourself vomit and/or using laxatives to get rid of calories.

When does it start?
Bulimia nervosa probably starts around the same time as anorexia nervosa. It may stay hidden for longer and only appears in the early- to mid-twenties. It is most common in women who have been overweight as children. About four out of every 100 women suffers from bulimia at some time in their lives, rather fewer men.

You will usually be a normal weight. This is because, although you try to lose weight by dieting, making yourself sick or taking laxatives, you also 'binge eat'.

Delicious... I can taste the guilt.
Bingeing
You go out and buy lots of fattening foods that you would normally avoid. You then go back to your room, or home, and eat it all, really quickly in secret. You might get through packets of biscuits, several boxes of chocolates and a number of cakes in just a couple of hours.

Afterwards you will feel stuffed and bloated - and probably guilty and depressed. You try to get rid of the food you have eaten by making yourself sick, or purging with laxatives. It is extremely uncomfortable and tiring, but you may find yourself trapped in a routine of binge eating, vomiting and/or purging. It can dominate your life.

Binge eating disorder
This is a pattern of behaviour that has recently been recognised. It involves dieting and binge eating, but not vomiting. It is distressing, but much less harmful than bulimia. Sufferers are more likely to become overweight.

How do eating disorders affect your body and mind?

If you starve yourself, you may:

**Mind**
- sleep badly
- find it difficult to concentrate, or think clearly about anything other than food or calories
- feel depressed
- lose interest in other people
- became obsessive about food, eating, and sometimes other things such as washing, cleaning or tidiness.

**Body**
- find it harder to eat a normal meal because your stomach has shrunk
- feel tired, weak and cold as your body’s metabolism slows down
- become constipated
- not grow to your full height
- get brittle bones, which break easily