

# Advice and information for parents

# Eating Disorders 0808 802 5544

## About eating disorders

Children's attitudes to eating are affected by a range of factors including the attitudes and behaviours of parent and peers towards food, nutrition and body image, trauma, stress, and bullying. Appetites may change at different ages and this is normal; some eat a lot or eat anything, others are more particular. Younger children often refuse to eat certain foods and teenagers may go through food fads. Most of us have tried out different eating habits or diets at some time in our lives, whether to lose or put on weight, or to improve our health and this is not necessarily a cause for concern.

Problems can start to emerge when a child or young person feels under pressure. They may lose their appetite; or they may turn to food for comfort and eat even when they are not hungry; their worries about food may be related to their size or body shape, or can be more about their emotions and self-esteem.

Young people's problems with food can begin as a coping strategy for times when they are bored, anxious, angry, lonely, ashamed or sad. Food becomes a problem when it is used to help cope with painful situations or feelings, or to relieve stress, perhaps without even realising it. Children can fear getting fat and may perceive their body shape differently than those around them. It is useful to know that an eating problem is usually symptomatic and suggests there is an underlying problem that needs to be identified, understood and treated.

Eating patterns often become established during adolescence and when parents have an 'instinct' that something doesn't feel right, it should be taken seriously. When eating problems develop, persist and interfere with a young person's normal way of life, a full mental health assessment may show whether the child or young person is suffering with an eating disorder. The most serious are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and compulsive eating. Eating disorders affect more girls than boys, but boys do suffer from them too.

Young people with eating disorders often consider them to be a solution rather than a problem, making identification and treatment more difficult. They tend to have extreme concerns and sense of self-worth in terms of body shape and weight.

## Eating disorders on the increase

There is an increasing problem in the general population, especially amongst young people. In 2017 the eating disorder charity Beat reported that approximately 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder (89% girls and 11% boys).

## Symptoms of eating disorders

- Tiredness
- Poor concentration
- Stunting of growth
- Delay of sexual development
- Mood swings
- Social withdrawal
- Anxiety and depression
- Changes in weight and/or body shape especially weight loss of more than one stone in three months
- Poor/unhealthy skin

Other indicators that a young person might have an eating problem include:

- Making themselves sick
- Worrying about losing control over how much they eat
- Believing they are fat when others say they are too thin
- When food dominates their life

## Types of eating disorders

- Anorexia Nervosa - underweight - eating too little
- Bulimia Nervosa - typically normal weight - eating too much, then purging
- Binge Eating Disorder (BED) - overweight - eating too much
- Emotional Overeating - overweight - eating too much

Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa are serious mental health conditions that need professional help to diagnose and treat. They can lead to other physical and emotional problems.

People with **Anorexia Nervosa** have an extreme fear of gaining weight. They can feel even during and after significant weight loss. They may starve themselves by only eating tiny quantities of food. They become so preoccupied with their weight and shape, and so distorted in their thinking about food, that it is very difficult for them to accept the need to eat a proper diet. Nevertheless, they remain fascinated with food and often enjoy cooking for others. Sometimes they may pretend to have eaten when they have not. They may exercise vigorously, use laxatives or make themselves sick in order to lose more weight. A girl's periods may stop or never even start.

People with **Bulimia Nervosa** binge eat large amounts of food and then make themselves sick to get rid of the food. They may also take large amounts of laxatives. People with bulimia may look neither overweight nor underweight, and this eating disorder is often difficult to detect. This often begins in the teenage years and continuous bingeing and vomiting can eventually do serious harm.

**Binge Eating Disorder** and emotional overeating describe a person's compulsion to consume much more food than their bodies need over a long period; they use food to comfort or distract themselves. They may become very overweight, which can lead to serious medical problems.

## Getting help for eating problems

The earlier a person gets help and support for an eating disorder, the more likely they are to recover successfully. Going to the GP is the most important first step; if they suspect an eating disorder, they will carry out tests on e.g. weight, body shape, blood and eating patterns. They may also want to talk to the parent, to build up a clear picture.

Young people might choose to go to the GP alone. If your child is between the ages of 13 to 16, they have the same rights to confidentiality as an adult and the doctor, nurse or pharmacist won't inform parents, or anyone else, as long as they believe that the child or young person fully understands the information and decisions involved. If they are refusing treatment and their condition is life threatening parents will be informed.

The GP will make a referral if they decide that the young person needs specialist help; waiting lists vary but can be long in some areas.

It is very helpful for parents and the young person to find extra support through helplines, groups and forums during this time. The eating disorder charity B-eat has an excellent local support finder feature on its website <http://helpfinder.b-eat.co.uk/>

## What can help? What to do next

These are some things that may really make a difference:

1. It can be hard for parents to know if a young person has an eating problem or disorder. Look out for some of the following signs of difficulty, which need to be taken seriously:
  - Regularly skipping meals and obsessively counting calories
  - Eating overly large portions at mealtimes, constant snacking, hoarding food
  - Eating only low calorie food
  - Showing a keen interest in buying or cooking food for others
  - Wearing very loose clothes to hide the body
  - An obsession with exercise
  - Dramatic weight loss or gain
  - Disappearing from the table directly after meals (in order to make themselves vomit)
  - Saying they are unhappy with their body
  - Food missing in large amounts from the kitchen
2. Be aware that many young people may deny they have a problem. They may try to keep it a secret, and find it difficult to accept they need help.
3. Go to the GP. Make notes about your main concerns ahead of the appointment. The GP will make an assessment and if they think the young person needs specialist help, they should be able to refer the young person to a mental health professional specialising in this area.
4. There are many different types of treatment, depending on the nature of the eating disorder and the symptoms. Treatment can include dietary control as well as individual and family therapy, aimed at resolving underlying emotional problems.
5. If the young person has lost a great deal of weight or other help seems not to work, they may

need to spend some time in hospital or a special unit, where treatment can be more closely monitored.

6. Ask family and friends to help support a young person with an eating disorder, particularly by talking to them about their feelings and everyday problems.
7. Young people unwilling to accept help from their parents may find it easier to talk to a teacher at school or another trusted adult.

## Finding support

### Beat Eating Disorders

[www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Offers information, support and a range of services for people with eating disorders, and for their friends, families and carers.

#### Helplines

Open 365 days a year from 12-8pm on weekdays, and from 4-8pm on weekends and bank holidays. Interpreter service available.

Adultline (for over 18s, including carers and professionals): 0808 801 0677

Youthline (for under 18s): 0808 801 0711

Studentline (for all students): 0808 801 0811

#### 1:1 online chat

[https://support.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/app/chat/chat\\_launch](https://support.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/app/chat/chat_launch)

Open on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 12-8pm, and on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays from 4-8pm.

#### Email

Adults: [help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Young people: [fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Students: [studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

#### Online support groups

[www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services/online-groups](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services/online-groups)

#### Directory of local services

<https://helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk>

You can use your postcode to search for support services near you.

#### Peer coaching

Provides support from people who've been there for anyone caring for someone with an eating disorder. Currently available in some UK regions only.

[www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services/echo-peer-coaching](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services/echo-peer-coaching)

#### Online peer support for young people in Scotland

[www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/scotland-online-peer-support-for-young-people](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/scotland-online-peer-support-for-young-people)

### YoungMinds

[www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/eating-problems](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/eating-problems)

Parents Lounge

[youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge](http://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge)

Our Parents Helpline experts answer questions about having difficult conversations with your child.

**#Take20**

[www.youngminds.org.uk/take20](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/take20)

Ideas and suggestions to help parents find 20 minutes to do something together with their child to support confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

## Finding support

<p><b>Anorexia and Bulimia Care</b> <a href="http://www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk">www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk</a> Supports people affected by eating disorders and their families.</p> <p>Helpline: 03000 11 12 13 (option 1 for support line, option 2 for family and friends).</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:support@anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk">support@anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk</a></p>	<p><b>NHS Choices</b> <a href="http://www.nhs.uk">www.nhs.uk</a> Information about warning signs, getting help and treatment: <a href="http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/eating-disorders">www.nhs.uk/conditions/eating-disorders</a></p>
<p><b>NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence)</b> <a href="http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng69/chapter/Recommendations">www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng69/chapter/Recommendations</a> Provides information about recognising and treating eating disorders, and outlines good practice for professionals.</p>	<p><b>MindEd</b> <a href="http://www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html">www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html</a> A website where you can hear about other parents' experiences and find clear, helpful guidance on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing - including around eating disorders.</p>
<p><b>Childline</b> <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk">www.childline.org.uk</a> If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.</p> <p>24/7 helpline: 0800 1111</p> <p>Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor: <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat">www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat</a></p> <p>To email: Sign up on the website, so you can send your message without needing to use your name or email address, at <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk/registration">www.childline.org.uk/registration</a></p>	<p><b>The Mix</b> <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk">www.themix.org.uk</a> If you're under 25 you can talk to The Mix about anything that's troubling you over the phone, email or webchat. You can also use their phone or online counselling service.</p> <p>Helpline open daily 4-11pm: 0808 808 4994</p> <p>Email: <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us">www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us</a></p> <p>Webchat open daily 4-11pm: <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team">www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team</a></p> <p>Counselling service: <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service">www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service</a></p>
<p><b>Youth Access</b> <a href="http://www.youthaccess.org.uk">www.youthaccess.org.uk</a> Offers information about advice and counselling services for young people aged 12-25 years.</p>	<p><b>Youth Wellbeing Directory</b> <a href="http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing">www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing</a> Lists local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.</p>

## **CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)**

[www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net)  
Provides support to anyone who is feeling down and needs to talk or find information.

Helpline open daily 5pm-midnight: 0800 58 58 58

Webchat open daily 5pm-midnight:  
[www.thecalmzone.net/help/webchat](http://www.thecalmzone.net/help/webchat)

## **Young Minds Crisis Messenger**

Provides free, 24/7 text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Text YM to 85258

Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.