

Eating disorders

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is characterised by obsessive thoughts about food and body weight. This includes people who limit the amount of food they eat (Anorexia nervosa), eat lots of food in a very small time and then purge (Bulimia) or overeat often (Compulsive overeating).

What are the symptoms of an eating disorder?

Obsessive thoughts about food and body weight can change eating patterns (dieting, making excuses not to eat, avoidance of social situations involving food, going to the bathroom straight after meals), mood (feeling depressed, irritable or anxious), daily activities (not wanting to go out socially often, exercising excessively, spending a lot of time talking about appearance or weight or looking in the mirror) and appearance (wearing baggy clothes, losing or gaining weight, greasy or dry hair and skin).

What causes an eating disorder?

There is no single cause for eating disorders. It is thought that a number of factors are involved to varying degrees in different people, including: genetic inheritance, personal and psychological factors related to adolescence or family issues for example, and social factors such as media representation of body image.

How many people will develop an eating disorder?

While anyone can develop an eating disorder, more females than males tend to be affected, in particular young women. It is difficult for researchers to give a definitive answer on prevalence, but an Australian study has shown that 8.8% of female adolescents had an eating disorder, with almost half of these also having high levels of depression or anxiety.

How are eating disorders treated?

Eating disorders can be treated successfully. Because they effect the person physically and psychologically, it is usually most helpful to treat them with a team of professionals including psychiatrists, dieticians, psychologists, nurses and others. When someone is very seriously affected, it may be necessary for them to be treated in hospital for a time. Information and mutual support are also important for the person affected and for family and friends.

How do I find out more?

It is important to ask your doctor about any concerns you have. SANE Australia also produces a range of easy-to-read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness. For more information related to this topic see:

■ *The SANE Guide to Medication and other Treatments*

Explains how all the different aspects of treatment work, by looking at clinical care, medication, support in the community and helping yourself.

■ *The SANE Guide to Healthy Living*

Explains the benefits of being physically healthy, gives tips on how to started becoming healthier and overcome obstacles as well as giving suggestions on finding support to help stay healthy.

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