

Eating disorders are mental illnesses.

Eating disorders can be hard to spot.

Recovery is possible.

What is an eating disorder?

Eating disorders are mental illnesses. They aren't the same as changing your diet – they can take over someone's life and the lives of those around them. While unhealthy eating behaviour is involved, they aren't about food. Instead, they are about feeling in control or coping with something else. People with eating disorders are often secretive about their eating, and may feel guilty and ashamed. All eating disorders are very serious, and everyone who has one deserves care and support. The good news is that recovery is possible.

In this booklet, we'll talk about different eating disorders and the treatment someone might have. Eating disorders differ from person to person – there are common signs, but someone with an eating disorder doesn't have to have them all. This is part of why eating disorders can be hard to spot, and it may take some time before someone is officially diagnosed. There's lots more information at beateatingdisorders.org.uk.

What is anorexia?

People with anorexia may eat very little food, or binge (eat lots of food all at once) and then exercise or make themselves sick so they don't gain weight. Someone with anorexia is likely to be a lower weight than expected for their age and height.

Signs may include:

- Worry about gaining weight.
- Not seeing their body the way you do.
- Being secretive about their eating.
- Doing lots of extra exercise.
- Feeling dizzy or faint.
- Wearing baggy clothes to hide their body shape.
- Feeling cold.
- Isolating themselves from others.

**Learn more
about anorexia at
[beateatingdisorders.org.uk/
anorexia](https://beateatingdisorders.org.uk/anorexia)**

What is bulimia?

People with bulimia may binge (eat lots of food at once) and then make themselves sick, exercise obsessively, or take laxatives because they feel guilty about what they've eaten, worry about their bingeing, or because their stomach is so painful. This is known as purging. Often someone with bulimia will stay a "normal" weight, which can make it even harder to spot.

Signs may include:

- Yo-yo weight changes.
- Secrecy around food.
- Exercising lots more than usual.
- Going to the toilet after meals.
- Isolating themselves from others.
- Poor skin.
- Scars on fingers, knuckles, or backs of hands, and bad breath from being sick.
- Feeling bad about their body image.

**Learn more
about bulimia at
[beateatingdisorders.org.uk/
bulimia](https://beateatingdisorders.org.uk/bulimia)**

What is binge eating disorder?

People with binge eating disorder may binge on a regular basis. Bingeing isn't just eating a bit more than usual – it might be days' worth of food in one sitting. Usually the food is what we might call "unhealthy". Binges will often be planned in advance and the food eaten in secret. Someone might feel "better" while bingeing, but afterwards they'll feel guilty and anxious about what has just happened. Their way to cope with this may be to plan their next binge.

Signs may include:

- Eating in secret.
- Hiding food packaging.
- Gaining weight.
- Spending lots of money on food.
- Self-conscious about eating in front of others.
- Loss of confidence and low self-esteem.
- Isolating themselves from others.

**Learn more about
binge eating disorder at
[beateatingdisorders.org.uk/
BED](https://beateatingdisorders.org.uk/BED)**

What is OSFED?

OSFED stands for "other specified feeding or eating disorder". If someone is diagnosed with OSFED, it means that their symptoms don't quite fit with what doctors expect of anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder, though it is just as serious.

What is ARFID?

ARFID stands for "avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder", where someone avoids certain foods or limits how much they eat. This can be for a number of reasons, for example, they might be sensitive to certain tastes or textures, have had a bad experience with food, or not be interested in eating due to other reasons.

**Learn more about
OSFED and ARFID at
[beateatingdisorders.org.uk/
types](https://beateatingdisorders.org.uk/types)**

Why does someone get an eating disorder?

We don't know the exact answer, but research is leading to better understanding. We know it could be down to someone's genetics or biology – there's lots of research into how the brain works that's starting to tell us more.

Eating disorders can be triggered by many things. These might be significant life events, like moving house or school, parents splitting up, or someone close to the person passing away. They could be things like stress from school work or trouble with their friendship group. People may also experience pressure from classmates, social media, and things like adverts, that makes them worry about the way they look and feel the need to change. These aren't the only reasons – we'd run out of room if we tried to list them all!

Anyone of any age, gender or background can have an eating disorder.

What happens when someone is diagnosed with an eating disorder?

Depending on their eating disorder and other factors, a person will need to see their doctor, school nurse or other healthcare professional to access treatment. For bulimia and binge eating disorder, self-help may be recommended first – for example, keeping food and mood diaries. If someone is diagnosed with anorexia, they will probably be advised to access outpatient treatment such as therapy first of all. Sometimes they may need inpatient treatment, and during this they will usually stay in the hospital full time.

Full recovery from eating disorders is possible.