



Eating Disorders: How To Help

A Guide for Family and Friends

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a serious disease in which a person:

- is overly concerned (preoccupied) with weight, shape and food
- has a strong desire to be thin
- tries to lose or control weight in ways that could seriously harm their health

The most common eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. Both disorders are more common in females, but do occur in males.

Anorexia Nervosa:

- affects about 1 out of every 200 girls
- is more common in younger teens, 12 to 14 years
- is the 3rd most common chronic illness of teenagers, following asthma and obesity

Bulimia Nervosa:

- affects about 1 out of every 40 girls
- is more common in older teens, 16 to 19 years

Eating disorders are complicated illnesses that do not have a single cause.

A combination of factors increase a person's risk of developing an eating disorder.

Risk factors include:

- certain personality types
- problems within the family
- the culture we live in
- a close family member with an eating disorder
- concerns about weight
- dieting

Not all people have all these risk factors.

What are the signs and symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa?

- refusal to maintain a normal, healthy body weight
- intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat
- distorted body image
- in females, missing at least 3 periods (menstrual cycles) in a row

What are the signs and symptoms of Bulimia Nervosa?

- frequent episodes of eating large amounts of food in a short period of time, called binge-eating
- feeling unable to control eating behaviour during binges
- regular purging to avoid weight gain by vomiting, taking laxatives or diuretics, fasting or excessive exercising
- preoccupation with body shape and size

How can parents help?

The first step you can take toward helping your child with an eating disorder is to learn the signs and symptoms of eating disorders.

Don't avoid confronting your child about your concerns.

Have your child see his or her doctor and discuss your concerns openly.

Learn about what treatment services are available in your area. See the back of this page for local resources.

Get support for yourself and don't neglect your interests. Try to manage your stress and maintain some balance in your life. You need to stay strong and healthy for your child.

How can friends help?

If your friend has an eating disorder, your role is to be supportive.

You may wish to express your concerns about his or her behaviour in a supportive and caring way. Encourage your friend to confide in an adult and/or get professional help.

Remember that as a friend you are not responsible for a solution. Simply be available to your friend if and when he or she needs support.

If your friend's behaviour seems dangerous to you, you can tell an adult, such as a teacher or guidance counselor.

Local resources

- Pediatric Eating Disorder Program - A regional outpatient treatment program for children with eating disorders. McMaster Children's Hospital, Hamilton, ON L8N 3Z5. Phone **905-521-2100**, ext. **73497**, Fax 905-521-5056.
- St. Joseph's Healthcare, Hamilton - A regional centre for adults with eating disorders. Offers group therapy only. Phone **905-522-1155**, ext. **3954**
- Newport Centre at Port Colburne - Provides outpatient services for people 16 years of age and older. Phone **905-834-4501**, ext. **2532**
- Homewood Mental Health Centre - Provides an in-patient treatment program for people 16 years of age and older. Phone **519-824-1010**, ext. **292**
- Children's Exercise and Nutrition Centre - For children ages 4 to 16 who are overweight. Phone **905-521-2100**, ext. **77967**
- Hospital for Sick Children - Provides an in-patient program and day treatment for children up to age 18. Phone **416-813-7402**
- National Eating Disorders Information Centre - www.nedic.ca. Phone **416-340-4156**