

EMPLOYEE GUIDE

Eating disorders

dispelling the myths and getting help



wtw

Eating disorders are not all about food

They are about feelings. They are a coping mechanism. They are about control.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses where the sufferer uses disordered eating behaviours to cope with difficult situations or feelings.

Like any mental illness, eating disorders can cross the boundaries of all ages, gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity.

An ageless and genderless mental illness

From fasting or limiting the amount of food eaten to bingeing on large quantities then making themselves sick, misusing laxatives

or excessive exercise, eating disorders often start during adolescence, but can develop in children as young as 6 or adults age 70.

Anyone who has an eating disorder needs, and deserves, compassionate support and early intervention to help them get better.

As more people than ever before are receiving treatment, we explain some of **the different disorders, how to spot signs of suffering and sources of support.**

Between

1.25 AND 3.4 MILLION

people in the UK are affected by an eating disorder

UK hospital admissions have risen

84%

in the last 5 years



Dispelling the myths

Dispelling the myths

There is a misconception that eating disorders are a fad in young females. The harsh reality is that hospital admissions rose 128% last year in boys and young men and many sufferers endure their eating disorder for an average of 6 years.

Low self-esteem, portrayals of perfect body image in the media, bullying or family and relationship problems are often cited as the main triggers for eating disorders.

But there is another major culprit that gets overlooked – stress.

Working with an eating disorder

Work can be a source of stress for many as they strive to hit deadlines and sales targets or deal with difficult customers or dealing with pressures of the home-work juggle.

The average duration of an eating disorder is

6 YEARS

For anyone trying to manage or hide their eating disorder, work can be yet another challenge to overcome - hiding unusual eating habits or frequent trips to the toilet from management and colleagues can be very stressful.

People with eating disorders tend to compare themselves professionally and personally against unrealistic standards and worry about peoples' opinions of them.

Colleagues who may be suffering from an eating disorder should be handled with compassion and understanding - not frustration or humiliation.

Around

25% of those affected by an eating disorder are male



The 3 most common eating disorders

Anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder can cause long-term damage to the heart, digestive system, bones, teeth and mouth, fertility or even life-threatening illnesses.

1

Anorexia nervosa

Controlling weight by not eating enough food, over-exercising or both

2

Bulimia nervosa

A cycle of eating large quantities of food (bingeing), then compensating for overeating by vomiting, taking laxatives or diuretics, fasting, or exercising excessively (purging).

3

Binge eating disorder

Regularly eating excessive amounts of food until you feel uncomfortably full

40%

of people affected by an eating disorder suffer from **bulimia nervosa**

Around

10%

of people affected by an eating disorder suffer from **anorexia nervosa**

Other less-known eating disorders

Avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)

Avoiding certain foods or types of food, restricting intake or both.

Orthorexia

An unhealthy obsession with eating pure, clean food which can lead to feelings of anxiety or guilt if they eat food they feel is unhealthy.

Pica

A feeding disorder in which someone eats non-food substances that have no nutritional value, such as paper, soap, paint, chalk, or ice.

People with pica don't usually avoid regular food but some non-food items that they consume can be very dangerous.

Rumination disorder

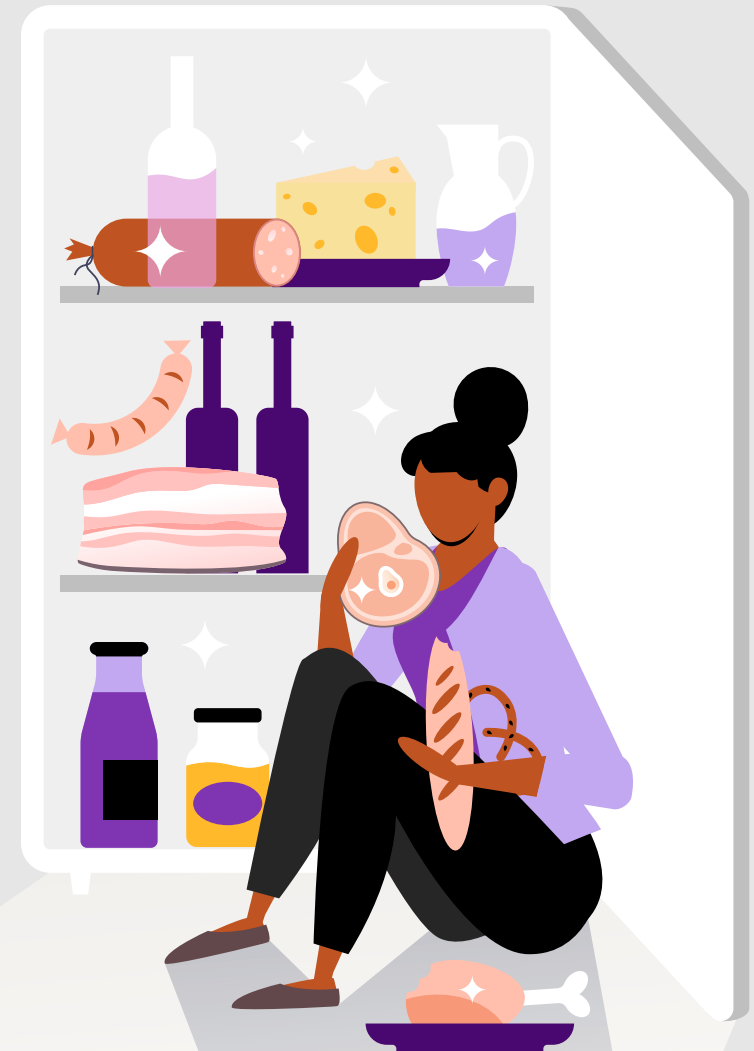
An illness that involves repetitive, habitual bringing up of food that might be partly digested. The person may re-chew and re-swallow the food or just spit it out.

Eating disorders are most common between the ages of

16-40

If a person's symptoms don't exactly fit one of these diagnoses, they may be diagnosed with an "other specified feeding or eating disorder" (OSFED) such as purging disorder or night eating syndrome. A full description of OSFEDs can be found [here](#).

[FIND OUT MORE](#)



Spotting the signs

People with eating disorders will often go to great efforts to avoid their illness being noticed at home, school or at work.

Children can put on a front of performing well in education and appearing happy at home, while colleagues may excel in their job and enjoy social situations. On the surface. Inside tells a different story.

Although physical changes, such as weight loss may be a warning, the first sign of an eating disorder is often the person's behaviour.

Whether you are a parent, friend or colleague, look out for these tell-tale physical, behavioural and emotional signs:

Behavioural symptoms

- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Unusual behaviour around food e.g. cutting food into tiny pieces or even hoarding food
- An interest in cooking, but refusing to eat what they have cooked or cooking meals for others without eating
- Wanting to eat alone in a separate room
- Avoiding eating in public
- Wearing baggy clothes to hide weight loss

- Vomiting after eating
- Taking laxatives
- Going to the toilet immediately after eating
- Eating large quantities of food without appearing to gain weight
- Repeatedly weighing themselves
- Avoiding certain foods
- Preoccupation with weight, calories, fat grams, or dieting
- Intense fear of weight gain, being 'fat' or body dysmorphia
- Social isolation

Physical symptoms

- Dramatic weight loss or fluctuations
- Long-term weight stagnation (adolescents typically put on weight until the age of 20)
- Constipation, cold intolerance, abdominal pain, lethargy, or excess energy
- Mouth infections, bad breath, sensitive or damaged teeth
- Scars on fingers, knuckles or the back of hand from making themselves sick
- Missing menstrual periods

Psychological symptoms

- Having an obsession with appearance and other people's perception of their body
- Talking about feeling guilty after eating
- Getting stressed at mealtimes
- Low self-esteem
- Depression, anxiety and panic attacks
- Intense mood swings
- Insomnia
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts and impulses



Children and eating disorders

The latest NHS figures state that almost 10,000 children and young people were treated for eating disorders between April and December 2021 with a record demand for support services – an increase of a quarter compared to the same period the previous year.

There are a number of factors that can make children more vulnerable to developing an eating disorder.

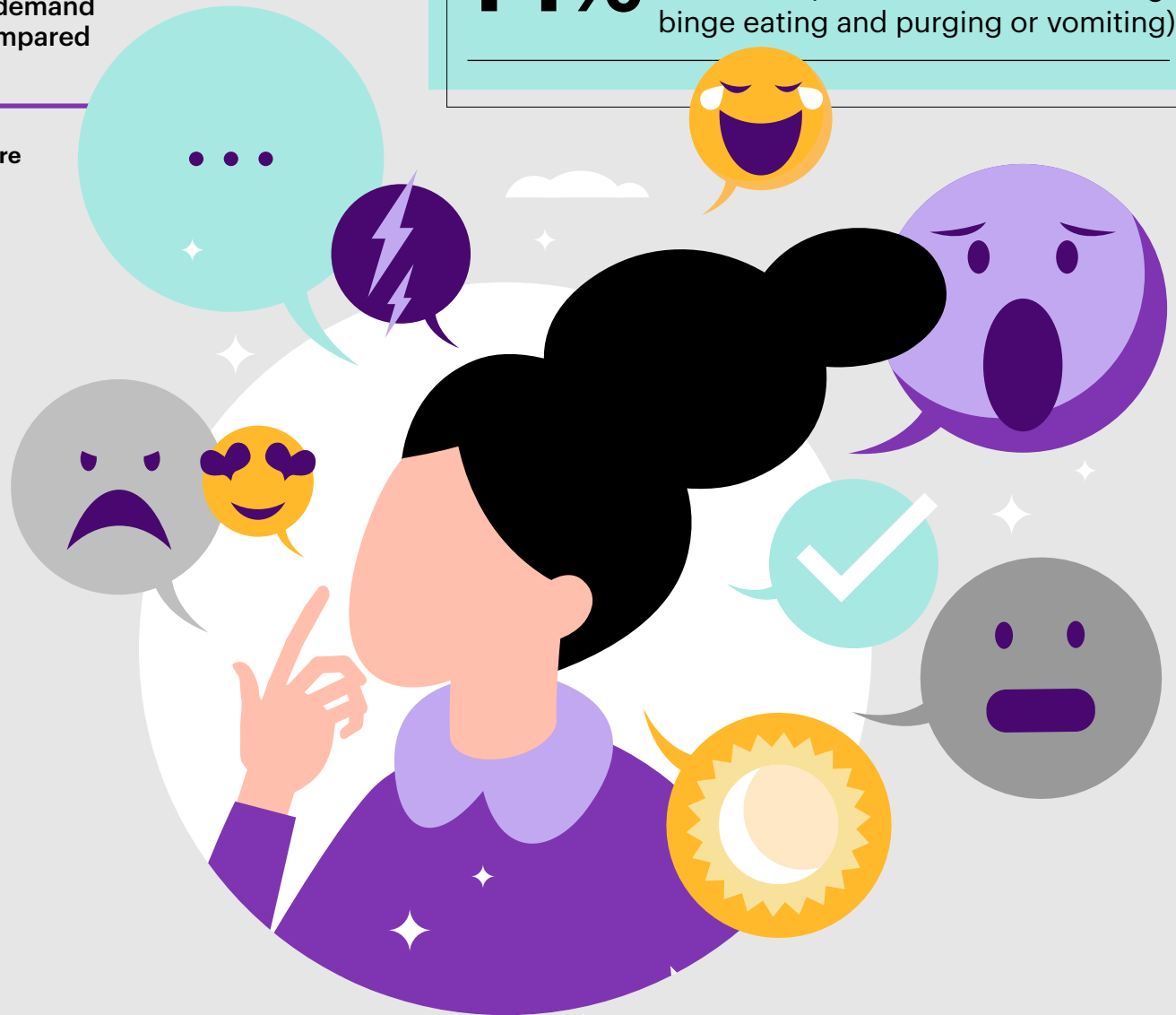
- Having a close family member with an eating disorder
- Having an existing mental health difficulty such as depression or anxiety
- Stressful life events such as divorce
- Abuse
- Bullying
- Pressures at school
- Pressure from the media to be thin
- Having hobbies where being thin is perceived as important, such as gymnastics

14% aged 12 to 21 experience eating difficulties (extreme restrictive eating, binge eating and purging or vomiting)

The number of children admitted to hospital has increased by

35%

in the last year



Support and self-help

Navigating life with an eating disorder can be a very lonely and scary place. Worryingly, only 1 in 10 young people in need of help are receiving treatment for their eating disorders. Having support from everyone in their lives can help make the journey to recovery that little less daunting.

If you are concerned for your child or a colleague, they must see their GP for a formal diagnosis and treatment plan. While there are no specific drugs to treat eating disorders, you may be offered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for eating disorders (CBT-ED), family therapy or talking therapies.

In the meantime, here are some invaluable sources of support:



BEAT - provides helplines, advice and resources for people of all ages dealing with eating disorders. Contact their helplines 365 days a year or try a personal webchat

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

Helpfinder – an online directory to find support groups in your local area

[FIND OUT MORE](#)



Worth Warrior - a free app created for young people to manage negative body image, low self-worth, and related early-stage eating difficulties or disorders.

[FIND OUT MORE](#)





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