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Eating disorders

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Summary

- There is no single cause of eating disorders.
- Body dissatisfaction, dieting, and depression are common risk factors for the onset of an eating disorder.
- Eating disorders can be overcome with professional help and support from family and peers.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses. They can affect women and men of all age groups, from a range of backgrounds and from different cultures. Despite an increase in the incidence and understanding of eating disorders, many people live with these disorders for a long time without a clinical diagnosis or treatment.

Female adolescents and young women are most commonly diagnosed with an eating disorder, but men are also affected and are often under-diagnosed. Eating disorders are estimated to affect almost one million Australians.

Symptoms of eating disorders

There are some warning signs that are common to people with eating disorders. These may include:

- weight loss, weight gain or weight fluctuation, usually due to dieting, but sometimes from an illness or stressful situation
- preoccupation with body appearance or weight
- sensitivity to cold
- faintness, dizziness and fatigue
- increased mood changes and irritability
- social withdrawal
- anxiety or depression
- inability to think rationally or concentrate
- increased interest in preparing food for others
- obsessive rituals, such as only drinking out of a certain cup
- eating in secret
- wearing baggy clothes or changes in clothing style
- excessive or fluctuating exercise patterns
- avoidance of social situations involving food
- frequent excuses not to eat
- disappearance of large amounts of food from the refrigerator or pantry
- trips to the bathroom after meals
- constant and excessive dieting

Body dissatisfaction, dieting and depression are the most common risk factors for the onset of an eating disorder.

Types of eating disorders

The main types of eating disorder include:

- [anorexia nervosa](#) - characterised by restricted eating, loss of weight and a fear of putting on weight
- [bulimia nervosa](#) - periods of bingeing on high-kilojoule foods (often in secret), followed by attempts to compensate by over-exercising, vomiting, or periods of strict dieting. The bingeing is often accompanied by feelings of shame and being 'out of control'
- [binge eating disorder](#) - characterised by recurrent periods of binge eating (can include eating much more than normal, feeling uncomfortably full, eating large amounts when not physically hungry). Feelings of guilt, disgust and depression can follow binge eating episodes. Binge eating does not involve compensatory behaviours, such as for bulimia nervosa
- [other specified feeding or eating disorder \(OSFED\)](#) - feeding or eating behaviours that cause the individual distress and impairment, but do not meet the criteria for the first three eating disorders.

Causes of eating disorders

There is no single cause of eating disorders. It is currently agreed that a number of factors combine to cause eating disorders -- social, psychological and biological factors all play a part, in varying degrees, for different people.

Social factors

Contributing social factors may include:

- media and other presentations of the 'ideal' body shape as slim and fit
- pressure to achieve and succeed
- peer pressure to be or behave in a certain way
- a cultural tendency to judge people by their appearance
- occupations or pursuits that emphasise a particular body shape and size - for example, ballet, modelling, gymnastics and elite sports.

Major life changes or events may also contribute to the onset of an eating disorder, including:

- relationship breakdowns
- pregnancy and childbirth
- the death of a loved one.

Eating disorders can also be triggered by the accumulation of many minor stressors such as:

- fear of the responsibilities of adulthood
- a belief that love is dependent on high achievement
- poor communication between family members.

Biological factors

Contributing biological factors may include:

- adolescence and its associated physical changes
- genetic or familial factors -- for example, families that are overtly focused on food, weight, shape and appearance.

Psychological factors

Contributing psychological factors may include:

- low self-esteem
- negative body image
- perfectionism
- depression
- anxiety
- impulsivity
- obsessive thinking
- difficulties expressing emotions.

If you think you have an eating disorder

Many people have problems with their eating. If you do have an eating disorder, get help. Remember that with professional help, eating disorders can be recovered from.

Getting professional help and support from others is important. Recovery may be slow as you learn to approach food in a more positive way and understand the reasons for your behaviour, but the effort will be worthwhile.

Family and friends of someone with an eating disorder

Parents, siblings, partners, friends, extended family, work colleagues and others often experience many different feelings as they learn to cope with the effects of an eating disorder on the person, and on their own lives.

The strain of living with an eating disorder can create tensions and divisions within a family. There may be feelings of confusion, grief, anger, guilt and fear.

Family and friends can remind their loved one that the effort associated with recovery will be worthwhile for everyone. The most important thing is to show love, care and faith in the person, and seek advice at the earliest possible time.

Some suggestions for family and friends include:

- Be honest and open about your concerns.
- Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' statements - for example, 'I am concerned for you because I have noticed you are not so happy at the moment' rather than, 'You aren't happy at the moment!'
- Focus on the person's behaviour, rather than their weight, food consumption or physical appearance.
- Try to take the focus off food and weight. The person with the eating disorder is already likely to be excessively focused on food and weight issues.
- Mealtimes should not be a battleground. Frustrations and emotions need to be expressed but not at mealtimes, which are already likely to be difficult.
- As much as possible, do things as you usually would. The person with the eating disorder needs to learn to co-exist with food and other people, rather than others learning to co-exist with the eating disorder.

Treatment and recovery for people with eating disorders

Many different forms of therapy are available and it is important to remember that different approaches work for different people. Finding the right approach and early intervention maximises prospects of recovery. Professional help and support from others is important.

Because eating disorder affect people physically and mentally, a range of health practitioners might be involved in treatment including psychiatrists, psychologists, GPs, dietitians, social workers, nurses and dentists.

Where to get help

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

- Your GP
- Your local community health centre or another health practitioner
- [Eating Disorders Victoria](#) Helpline Tel. 1300 550 236
- [Butterfly Foundation](#) Tel. 1800 334 673
- [Dietitians Association of Australia](#) Tel. 1800 812 942
- Psychologist

References

- *Classifying eating disorders - DSM-5*, Eating Disorders Victoria. [More information here.](#)
- *What is an eating disorder?*, Eating Disorders Victoria. [More information here.](#)
- *Paying the price: the economic and social impact of eating disorders in Australia*, 2012, The Butterfly Foundation for Eating Disorders. [More information here.](#)
- *Risk factors*, Eating Disorders Victoria. [More information here.](#)
- *What causes an eating disorder?*, The Centre for Eating Disorders, Baltimore, USA. [More information here.](#)

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Healthy eating basics

- [Balancing energy in and energy out](#)

[A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...](#)

- [Body mass index \(BMI\)](#)

[Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat...](#)

- [Children's diet - fruit and vegetables](#)

[If you eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables every day, your child may eventually follow your lead...](#)

- [Dairy and dairy alternatives](#)

[Dairy products \(and dairy alternatives\) are packed with calcium, protein and lots of other essential nutrients. Calcium is vital for healthy teeth and bones. It is also important for your muscles...](#)

- [Eggs](#)

[The humble egg is a powerhouse of nutritional goodness. Eggs are full of things your body needs. They are a great source of protein, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals \(such as vitamin A, vitamin D...](#)

- [Energy in food \(kilojoules and calories\)](#)

[A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...](#)

- [Food Standards Australia New Zealand \(FSANZ\)](#)

[FSANZ's role is to protect the health and safety of people in Australia and New Zealand by maintaining a safe food supply...](#)

- [Getting enough protein](#)

[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)

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[A good balance between exercise and food intake is important to maintain a healthy body weight...](#)

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[Even if you are careful about the salt you consume, you may be surprised that some of the food you eat contains hidden salt that you're not even aware of. Learn how to cut down on salt...](#)

- [Kids and energy needs](#)

[It's important for kids to eat a wide variety of foods for a healthy, well-balanced diet and to be physically active. Creating healthy habits during childhood helps to ensure lifelong healthy...](#)

- [Look after your health at harvest time](#)

[Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness...](#)

Food types

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[The size of a standard drink can vary according to the type of alcohol...](#)

- [Cereals and wholegrain foods](#)

[Common cereal foods include bread, breakfast cereals and pasta...](#)

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[Dairy products \(and dairy alternatives\) are packed with calcium, protein and lots of other essential nutrients. Calcium is vital for healthy teeth and bones. It is also important for your muscles...](#)

- [Fats and oils](#)

[Animal products and processed foods like fried fast food are generally high in saturated fats...](#)

- [Fish](#)

[Eating two or more serves of fish per week can reduce the risk of a range of diseases including dementia, depression and cardiovascular disease...](#)

- [Foods from plants and animals](#)

[Some of the foods we eat come from animals and others come from plants...](#)

- [Fruit and vegetables](#)

[Eating fruit and vegetables can help protect against some diseases including diabetes and some cancers...](#)

- [Getting enough protein](#)

[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)

- [Herbs](#)

[Use herbs to enhance the flavour of virtually any dish, including desserts...](#)

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[Did you know lunch is just as important as breakfast? In other words, don't skip lunch: you need it every day! A nutritious lunch will give you the energy to get through an afternoon of work...](#)

- [Meat and poultry](#)

[Meat and poultry are a great source of protein and lots of other nutrients your body needs. Check your recommended intake of meat and poultry and try to stick with it...](#)

- [Nutrition – Summer fruit and vegetables \(video\)](#)

[Salads are a great way for you achieve your 5 serves of vegies every day...](#)

- [Nuts and seeds](#)

[Nuts are a healthy food and a good source of protein and healthy fats...](#)

- [Organic food](#)

[Organic foods are farmed in a more environmentally sustainable way than conventional foods...](#)

- [Simple ways to cut down on fat](#)

[Cutting down on fat is not as hard as you think. Here's how to maintain a healthy weight by consuming the right amount and types of fat...](#)

- [Soft drinks, juice and sweet drinks - children](#)

[Encourage children to drink and enjoy water. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drinks may cause health problems for children if consumed in large amounts...](#)

- [Soft drinks, juice and sweet drinks – limit intake](#)

[Consumption of drinks containing added sugar is associated with weight gain, reduced bone strength and tooth erosion and decay...](#)

Vitamins and supplements

- [10 tips for getting enough vitamin D](#)

[A balanced UV approach is required to ensure some sun exposure for vitamin D while minimising the risk of skin cancer...](#)

- [Antioxidants](#)

[Antioxidants scavenge free radicals from the body's cells, and prevent or reduce the damage caused by oxidation...](#)

- [Calcium](#)

[If you don't have enough calcium in your diet, your bones will eventually become weak and brittle...](#)

- [Folate for pregnant women](#)

[Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy...](#)

- [Iodine](#)

[Good sources of iodine include fortified bread and any type of seafood, including seaweed...](#)

- [Iron](#)

[Iron is important for transporting oxygen in the blood...](#)

- [Vitamin and mineral supplements](#)

[Taking vitamin supplements is no substitute for a healthy diet...](#)

- [Vitamin B](#)

[The eight B-group vitamins are essential for various functions within the body...](#)

- [Vitamin D](#)

[A balanced approach to sunlight exposure will help you get enough vitamin D while protecting against skin cancer...](#)

- [Vitamin D - maintaining levels in winter \(video\)](#)

[Vitamin D is important for healthy bones, muscles and the nervous system...](#)

- [Vitamins - common misconceptions](#)

[There is no evidence that any one vitamin can slow ageing, restore sex drive or cure infertility...](#)

Health conditions and food

- [Arthritis and diet](#)

[No special diet or 'miracle food' can cure arthritis, but some conditions may be helped by avoiding or including certain foods...](#)

- [Asthma and food allergies](#)

[It is important to identify any foods or food chemicals that may trigger your asthma, but this must be done under strict medical supervision...](#)

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[Diet can influence your risk of developing some cancers, but there is no evidence that specific foods can cause or cure cancer...](#)

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[Replacing foods that contain saturated fats with foods that contain polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats will help to lower your cholesterol...](#)

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[Coeliac disease is an immune disease caused by gluten...](#)

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[The Food Standards Code requires that certain foods must be listed on the package of a food, or made known to the customer upon request. If you experience an allergic reaction to a known allergen not...](#)

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[This health assessment questionnaire will identify which zones of your lifestyle are contributing to your personal health risk and provide actions you can take to make positive change...](#)

- [Heart disease and food](#)

[A diet low in saturated fats and high in fibre and plant foods can substantially reduce your risk of developing heart disease...](#)

- [Huntington's disease and diet issues](#)

[Weight loss is often associated with Huntington's disease, but it doesn't appear to be a direct result of diet...](#)

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[Your mood can affect your food choices, and your food choices may affect your mood...](#)

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[Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...](#)

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[Scurvy is uncommon in Australia but anyone whose diet is inadequate in vitamin C is at risk...](#)

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[A diet high in fibre keeps the digestive system healthy...](#)

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[The long-term effects of consuming a combination of different additives in our food are currently unknown...](#)

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[Some foods include ingredients that have been genetically modified \(GM\), or are made using ingredients derived from GM organisms...](#)

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Dieting and diets

- [10 tips on how to eat more calcium](#)

[Reduce your intake of coffee, alcohol and soft drinks... 10 tips on how to eat more calcium...](#)

- [Body image and diets](#)

[Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...](#)

- [Dairy and dairy alternatives](#)

[Dairy products \(and dairy alternatives\) are packed with calcium, protein and lots of other essential nutrients. Calcium is vital for healthy teeth and bones. It is also important for your muscles...](#)

- [Food allergy and intolerance](#)

[Food allergy is an immune response, while food intolerance is a chemical reaction...](#)

- [Food for sport - tucker talk tips](#)

[Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes...](#)

- [Getting enough protein](#)

[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you](#)

[may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)

- [Gluten-free diet](#)

[Gluten sensitivity can be managed with a gluten-free diet...](#)

- [Heart disease and food](#)

[A diet low in saturated fats and high in fibre and plant foods can substantially reduce your risk of developing heart disease...](#)

- [How to cut down on salt](#)

[Even if you are careful about the salt you consume, you may be surprised that some of the food you eat contains hidden salt that you're not even aware of. Learn how to cut down on salt...](#)

- [Mood and food](#)

[Your mood can affect your food choices, and your food choices may affect your mood...](#)

- [Simple ways to cut down on fat](#)

[Cutting down on fat is not as hard as you think. Here's how to maintain a healthy weight by consuming the right amount and types of fat...](#)

- [Sporting performance and food](#)

[Good nutrition and a healthy diet are essential to improving your sports performance...](#)

- [Tips to keep our snacks on track](#)

[Most of us are prone to the odd snack or two. Check out these simple tips to keep your snacks on track...](#)

- [Vegetarian and vegan eating](#)

[A well-planned vegetarian or vegan diet can meet nutritional needs during all stages of life...](#)

- [Vegetarian diets and children](#)

[Children can eat a vegetarian diet and stay healthy as long as their extra nutritional needs are met...](#)

- [Weight loss and fad diets](#)

[With a balanced eating plan, it's what you leave in that makes all the difference...](#)

- [Weight management services](#)

[Always consult with your doctor before choosing any weight management service...](#)

- [Women's nutrition for life](#)

['Nutrition for life' identifies a woman's four main life stages and how to eat healthily for each of them. Following this information can lead to better health at any stage of your life...](#)

Nutritional needs throughout life

- [Women's nutrition for life](#)

['Nutrition for life' identifies a woman's four main life stages and how to eat healthily for each of them. Following this information can lead to better health at any stage of your life...](#)

- [Bottle feeding - nutrition and safety](#)

[Breastmilk or commercial infant formula is necessary for all babies less than 12 months...](#)

- [Breastfeeding and your diet](#)

[Breastfeeding women need to eat regularly and include a wide variety of healthy foods in their diet...](#)

- [Childcare and healthy eating](#)

[Childcare centres should provide healthy meals for your children...](#)

- [Dairy and dairy alternatives](#)

[Dairy products \(and dairy alternatives\) are packed with calcium, protein and lots of other essential nutrients. Calcium is vital for healthy teeth and bones. It is also important for your muscles...](#)

- [Disability - managing underweight](#)

[There are a number of ways that a person with a disability can successfully avoid unwanted weight loss...](#)

- [Eating tips for babies](#)

[First foods for babies can be prepared easily and cheaply at home without salt, seasonings and sweeteners...](#)

- [Eating tips for children \(3\) - older toddlers](#)

[Offer children the same foods as the family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition...](#)

- [Eating tips for preschoolers](#)

[Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite...](#)

- [Eating tips for school children](#)

[Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks...](#)

- [Eating tips for young toddlers](#)

[Children have a natural ability to sense when they are hungry and when they are full...](#)

- [Eggs](#)

[The humble egg is a powerhouse of nutritional goodness. Eggs are full of things your body needs. They are a great source of protein, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals \(such as vitamin A, vitamin D...](#)

- [Food and your life stages](#)

[The nutritional requirements of the human body change as we move through different life stages...](#)

- [Food for babies - tucker talk tips](#)

[Before six months, breastmilk or formula is the only food and drink that your baby needs...](#)

- [Getting enough protein](#)

[Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells. Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you may not be getting enough protein \(or...](#)

- [Good food for Elders - tucker talk tips](#)

[Good nutrition, a healthy diet and physical activity can help Elders prevent or manage health problems...](#)

- [Healthy active Koori kids - tucker talk tips](#)

[Good nutrition and physical exercise help to keep Koori kids healthy and avoid diseases when they get older...](#)

- [Healthy budget - tucker talk tips](#)

[You can buy more food if you spend most of your money on basic healthy foods like bread, cereals, fruit and vegies...](#)

- [Healthy eating during pregnancy - tucker talk tips](#)

[Some foods should be avoided during pregnancy as they carry bacteria that could harm your unborn baby...](#)

- [Healthy eating for adolescent girls](#)

[Eating healthy food is important at any age, but it's especially important for teenagers...](#)

- [Healthy eating for women in midlife](#)

[As you get older you need fewer calories, but your need for other nutrients remains unchanged. Healthy...](#)

- [Healthy eating for women in their later years](#)

[Being well nourished improves women's mental and physical health and quality of life at all life stages...](#)

- [Healthy eating for young women](#)

[Good nutrition is especially important during this stage of your life when there is so much happening: independent living, career development, travel, establishing relationships, babies and families...](#)

- [Lunch at work](#)

[Did you know lunch is just as important as breakfast? In other words, don't skip lunch: you need it every day! A nutritious lunch will give you the energy to get through an afternoon of work...](#)

- [Nutrition needs when you're over 65](#)

[Nutrition needs vary with age and gender. Now you're older, the foods and drinks that make up a healthy diet may need to be slightly different from when you were younger. In general, you&...](#)

Related Information

- [Other specified feeding or eating disorders \(OSFED\)](#)

OSFED is now one of the most common eating disorders...

- [Bulimia nervosa](#)

Understanding the warning signs of bulimia nervosa and seeking help as soon as possible will help your recovery...

- [Anorexia nervosa](#)

A common misconception is that anorexia nervosa only affects young women, but it affects males and females of all ages...

- [Eating disorders - support for families](#)

You have the potential to be a great support to your family member if they are diagnosed with an eating disorder...

- [Binge eating disorder](#)

You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment...

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Related information on other websites

- [Centre for Excellence in Eating Disorders](#)
- [Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria](#)

Support Groups

- [Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous](#)

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