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| STAFF FACTSHEET |

Eating disorders

What are they?

An eating disorder is a mental condition that involves controlling eating – usually to cope with other feelings or troubling situations. The most common eating disorders are:

* **Anorexia nervosa** (commonly known as ‘anorexia’) – controlling weight by not eating enough food, doing too much exercise, or both
* **Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)** – avoiding certain foods, limiting how much you eat, or both. People tend to develop this due to negative feelings about the smell, taste or texture of certain foods, or if they have had a negative experience with a type of food (e.g. choking or vomiting)
* **Bulimia** – losing control of how much you eat and then taking extreme action to avoid gaining weight, sometimes known as ‘purging’ (e.g. vomiting or extreme exercise)
* **Binge eating disorder (BED)** – eating too much food, to the point of feeling uncomfortably full
* **Other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED**) – when someone’s symptoms don’t exactly match those of the other eating disorders

Who’s most at risk?

Teenagers between 13 and 17 years old are most likely to be affected, but anyone can have an eating disorder. People are more likely to suffer from an eating disorder if:

* They, or a family member, have a history of an eating disorder, drug or alcohol misuse, or depression
* They’ve been criticised or made fun of for their weight, body shape or eating habits
* They have anxiety or low self-esteem
* They’re particularly worried about being slim because of a job or hobby (such as ballet dancing, modelling or sport)
* They’ve been sexually abused

Some pupils might develop an eating disorder to try to gain more control over their lives.

How do pupils find out about eating disorders?

Pupils might come across content promoting eating disorders online – for example, on social media, blogs and forums. These might take the form of:

* Meme images and videos
* Private groups for people with eating disorders, to share tips on how to hide behaviours
* Diet and weight loss guides
* Images or videos glamourising celebrities with eating disorders

Unrealistic body standards in the media might also convince some young people that they are not thin enough. Pupils might take extreme measures to meet these standards.

What to look for

Signs that a pupil has an eating order can include:

* Attendance – not coming into school at all, or frequently being absent from lessons
* Changes in weight – especially when their weight fluctuates rapidly, or when their weight and height is significantly lower or higher than expected for their age
* Lying about how much they’ve eaten, when they’ve eaten, or their weight
* Eating lots of food very quickly, eating very slowly, or hoarding food
* Eating alone – for example, finding a secret place in school to eat
* Going to the toilet a lot after eating
* Wearing loose-fitting clothes, or thick coats and jumpers, to hide changes in weight
* Refusing to get changed for lessons like PE and drama, or getting changed in private
* Stealing food from classmates, the school canteen or nearby shops (in cases of bulimia or binge-eating disorder)

What to do if you have a concern

* Tell the designated safeguarding lead (DSL), and make a written record, following our school’s procedures. Always take action if you’re worried
* Be mindful about your language, where possible – choose language that is neutral around body image (e.g. avoid using words such as ‘fat’, ‘big’ and ‘skinny’)
* [Insert any local procedures staff should know about here]

What you shouldn’t do

* Don’t make comments about how much or little a pupil is eating, or about their weight
* Don’t force the pupil to eat, or force them to stop eating
* Don’t inform the pupil’s parents/carers, or speak to the pupil’s friends about it

Sources

* [Keeping Children Safe in Education](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2)
* [Overview – eating disorders, NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/overview/)
* [Children, body image and the media, The Children’s Society](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/children-body-image-and-the-media)
* [Sharp rise in teenage girls with eating disorders during COVID, BBC](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-65954131)
* Ann Marie Christian, one of our associate experts

This factsheet was produced by[The Key Safeguarding](https://safeguarding.thekeysupport.com/)**: thekeysupport.com/safeguarding**