

How do I know if I have an eating disorder?

“ I just don't want to eat big meals with my family – I'd rather choose my own snacks. It doesn't mean I've got an eating disorder.” ”

Eating disorders can develop at any age, but most often affect people from the age of 14 to 25.

Eating disorders commonly start at a time when you are becoming more independent, changing the way you eat and possibly feeling different about your body.

You may have changed your diet in order to lose weight, perhaps turned vegetarian or started trying different foods.

You are likely to have more control over what you eat and have more of your meals and snacks with friends or on your own, rather than with your parents.

So what's the difference between eating differently and an eating disorder?

Eating disorders can develop when you start to use food in order to deal with difficult feelings and emotions.

Food plays a big part in our lives and it is natural to reach for our favourite snack for comfort or a little boost at the end of a long day.

But if you find that every day, food becomes the way that you deal with worry, sadness, loneliness and any other painful emotion, you may be developing an eating disorder.

It is often hard to recognise when eating patterns become damaging, because they can slowly develop and seem like changes in your eating habits.

Changing eating patterns can develop into harmful behaviour in many different ways. There are two main types of eating disorders.

“ I felt I had lost all control in my life. My friends had moved on and I wasn't doing well at school. Losing weight was the one thing I could do – food became the one thing I could control.” ”

What are the different types of eating disorders?

Anorexia involves severely restricting what you eat in order to lose weight. Sufferers lose a large amount of weight but believe themselves to be fat and have a great fear of putting on weight. People with anorexia have a fear of putting on weight. The intensity of this fear is profound and usually described as a phobia of normal body weight i.e. an irrational fear, not of being fat, but of being a normal weight.

People with anorexia can either be **restrictive** – they restrict their calorie intake and engage in excessive exercise or **bulimic**, eating a large amount of food at once then inducing vomiting.

Bulimia involves eating large amounts of food, then making yourself sick so your body does not absorb the food. Bulimia involves binge eating but at normal body weight. It occurs at an average age of 18.

All eating disorders are likely to change the way you live your life. You are likely to become more withdrawn, secretive and have sudden mood swings.

“ I know I've got a bit of a problem with food, but it's not serious enough to be an eating disorder.” ”

How do I know if I have an eating disorder?

What are the 'warning signs' for an eating disorder?

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you make yourself sick because you feel uncomfortably full?
2. Do you worry you have lost control over how much you eat?
3. Have you recently lost more than one stone in a three month period?
4. Do you believe yourself to be fat when others say you are too thin?
5. Would you say that food dominates your life?*

If you answer 'yes' to two or more questions, you may have anorexia or bulimia.

I think I have got an eating disorder – where do I go for help?

Eating disorders rarely get better on their own. There are many different professionals who have a lot of experience in helping people with eating disorders.

The hardest step can be recognising the problem and asking for help. You could see your GP – he or she can refer you to specialist psychiatrists, psychologists, dieticians, nutritionists and counsellors. Your GP is the best person to help you because he or she will know all the local services and support that is available.

Talking to a health professional does not automatically mean that you will be admitted to hospital. Your doctor will help to find you the right treatment for your individual needs.

This may involve seeing a counsellor, or a psychologist or a psychiatrist to understand how your eating disorder has developed and help you overcome it.

There are also many support groups with young people who are facing similar problems and may help you, alongside professional care.

If you find it difficult to see your GP and talk about your eating disorder, you could speak to your school nurse or a teacher at school or college.

Try to discuss your eating disorder with your family and friends. Your eating disorder will have affected your relationship with them and you probably find it hard to share your feelings with them.

But they are likely to know you are experiencing problems and will appreciate your decision to include them.

Where can I find out more?

Go to www.newbridge-health.org.uk/information for more information.

*The "Scoff Questionnaire"

Published in BMJ 4-12-1999 Vol 319 p 1467

The SCOFF questionnaire: assessment of a new screening tool for eating disorders

John F Morgan, clinical research fellow , Fiona Reid, lecturer in medical statistics , Prof J Hubert Lacey