

Treating Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are real, treatable diseases. They frequently coexist with other illnesses such as depression (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/childhood-depression-what-parents-can-do-to-help.aspx>), substance use (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/default.aspx>), or anxiety disorders (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-Disorders.aspx>). Psychological and medicinal treatments are effective for many eating disorders. The earlier eating disorders are diagnosed and treated, the better the chances are for recovery.



How are eating disorders treated?

Typical treatment goals include restoring adequate nutrition, bringing weight to a healthy level, reducing excessive exercise, and stopping bingeing and purging behaviors. Treatment plans often are tailored to individual needs and may include one or more of the following:

- Psychotherapy
- Medical care and monitoring
- Nutritional counseling
- Medications (</English/health-issues/conditions/treatments/Pages/Common-Medications-for-Psychiatric-Disorders.aspx>)

Some patients also may need to be hospitalized to treat problems caused by malnutrition or to ensure they eat enough if they are very underweight. Complete recovery is possible.

About psychotherapies:

Specific forms of psychotherapy, or talk therapy—including a family-based therapy and cognitive behavioral approaches—have been shown to be useful for treating specific eating disorders.

The Maudsley approach, for example, where parents of teens with anorexia nervosa (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/eating-disorders-anorexia.aspx>) assume responsibility for feeding their child, appears to be very effective in helping teens gain weight and improve eating habits and moods.

Others may undergo cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/How-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Disorders-are-Treated.aspx>) to reduce or eliminate binge-eating and purging behaviors. CBT helps a child learn how to identify distorted or unhelpful thinking patterns and recognize and change inaccurate beliefs.

About medications:

Medications such as antidepressants, antipsychotics, or mood stabilizers approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) may also be helpful for treating eating disorders and other co-occurring illnesses such as anxiety or depression. Check the FDA website (<http://www.fda.gov/>) for the latest information on warnings, patient information guides, or newly approved medications.



What is being done to better understand and treat eating disorders?

Researchers are finding that eating disorders are caused by a complex interaction of genetic, biological, psychological, and social factors. But many questions still need answers. Researchers are studying questions about genetics, brain function, and behavior to better understand and control eating disorders. Neuroimaging and genetic studies may also provide clues for how each person may respond to specific treatments.

- **Genetics:** Mental health researchers are studying the various combinations of genes to determine if any DNA variations are associated with the risk of developing a mental disorder ([/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Inheriting-Mental-Disorders.aspx](#)).
- **Neuroimaging:** Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), for example, may also lead to a better understanding of eating disorders. Neuroimaging already is used to identify abnormal brain activity in patients with schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression. It may help researchers better understand how people with eating disorders process information, regardless of whether they have recovered or are still in the throes of their illness.
- **Behavioral or psychological research:** Few studies of treatments for eating disorders have been conducted in the past due to the difficulty of this research. New studies currently underway, however, are aiming to remedy the lack of information available about treatment.

Additional Information & Resources:

- [Identifying and Treating Eating Disorders \(/English/news/Pages/Identifying-and-Treating-Eating-Disorders.aspx\)](#)
- [How Emotional and Behavioral Disorders are Treated \(/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/How-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Disorders-are-Treated.aspx\)](#)
- [Eating Disorders: Anorexia \(/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/eating-disorders-anorexia.aspx\)](#)
- [Eating Disorders: Bulimia \(/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Eating-Disorders-Bulimia.aspx\)](#)
- [Preventing Obesity and Eating Disorders in Adolescents \(http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2016-1649\)](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2016-1649) (AAP Clinical Report)
- [Eating Disorders Clinical Trials \(https://www.clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/results?term=%22eating+disorders%22&recr=Open\)](https://www.clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/results?term=%22eating+disorders%22&recr=Open) (ClinicalTrials.gov) - A listing of clinical trials on eating disorders at the National Institutes of Health and across the country.

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The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

