

# EATING DISORDERS

A MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE THAT WE CAN ALL HELP PREVENT

Traditionally, weight loss has been promoted as a requirement for good health. However, paying too much attention to weight and body shape can become an issue when these thoughts become obsessive and lead to eating patterns and behaviours that can impact daily living and develop into eating disorders over time. Although focusing too much on weight and body shape plays a role in eating disorders, the actual cause involves many factors, including societal and cultural influences, psychological and behavioural issues, and genetics.



## What is the difference between eating disorders and disordered eating habits?

When a person has a healthy relationship with food, they practice 'normal eating'. Normal eating involves eating a varied and balanced diet that provides enough nutrients and calories to meet the body's needs. It also involves having a positive attitude towards food, being flexible with food choices, as well as having a pleasurable eating experience. When eating behaviours significantly vary from 'normal', they can develop into eating disorders. Eating disorders are a serious mental health condition. In fact, eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness (NEDIC, 2014).

*Eating disorders and disordered eating habits differ from 'normal' and fall under a spectrum:*

- 1. EATING DISORDERS:** Clinically diagnosed conditions where individuals have an obsession with food, eating, and their body size. People with these conditions usually use unhealthy behaviours towards foods to feel a sense of control over their lives. As such, an eating disorder can develop as a coping method.
- 2. DISORDERED EATING:** These are habits around food that are troublesome but that occur less frequently or are less severe than eating disorders. However, disordered eating habits can develop into eating disorders over time. Frequent dieting is an example of disordered eating habits, and can be a key step to developing an eating disorder.

## What are some of the most common eating disorders?

- 1. Anorexia Nervosa (AN):** Characterized by a powerful fear of gaining weight and a distorted perception of weight and body shape. Individuals with AN display persistent and extreme behaviours that prevent healthy weight gain.
- 2. Bulimia Nervosa (BN):** BN involves a negative view of one's weight and body shape. BN is characterized by regular cycles of food restriction followed by binge eating (i.e., eating large amounts of food in a short period) and purging (e.g., vomiting, misuse of laxatives).
- 3. Binge Eating Disorder (BED):** Characterized by frequent episodes of binge eating. Unlike BN, BED does not include behaviours such as purging.
- 4. Orthorexia Nervosa (ON):** An emerging extreme, ON is a relatively new disorder characterized by an unhealthy obsession with eating "pure and healthy" foods. In most cases, ON develops from a well-intended desire to eat healthier and improve health. However, with time, strict guidelines develop and food is classified as "good" (e.g., healthy, organic, non-GMO, etc.) and "bad" (e.g., fast food, foods high in fat and sugar). This can result in social isolation and financial problems because of the time and money required to prepare and eat strictly "good" foods.



# WHAT CAUSES EATING DISORDERS?

There is no one cause of eating disorders, but there are many societal, familial, and individual factors that can influence eating habits. Individuals who struggle with identity and self-image issues, or who experience a traumatic life event are at increased risk. In addition, our current culture and society strongly promotes the message that thin is healthy and beautiful when it comes to weight and body shape. This can be extremely devaluing to individuals and further influence the negative perceptions they may have about their own bodies.



## WE CAN ALL BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

*Everyone has a hand in changing society's cultural norms when it comes to body image. By altering our language and actions regarding weight and body shape, we can promote an inclusive society.*

- **Model a healthy lifestyle and lead by example.** Practice 'normal eating' and lead a physically active lifestyle.
- **Get rid of diets!** Promote 'normal eating' as the way to reach your healthy eating goals.
- **Get rid of the scale!** Thin does not always mean healthy and weight is not a measurement of self-worth. Plan your goals around healthy behaviours (e.g., eating vegetables and fruit at every meal, leading a physically active lifestyle), not a specific weight.
- **Avoid labelling foods as "good" or "bad".** Labels promote feelings of guilt and shame.
- **Do not condone weight-stigma (e.g., jokes about body size) and speak out against the culture that promotes unhealthy body images.**

The main thing to remember is that eating behaviours that differ from 'normal eating' can potentially become an eating disorder. Given that society's views about weight can influence the development of disordered eating habits, we should all strive to promote a culture of inclusivity where weight and body shape are not used as measures of self-worth but, instead, encourage individuals to practice healthy behaviours. If you suspect that you or a family member have, or are at risk of developing an eating disorder, contact your healthcare provider.



### Reference:

NEDIC. (2014). *Statistics | National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)*. Retrieved June 1, 2016, from <http://nedic.ca/node/24>

