

Eating disorders  
Information for individuals and families

**NCMH**  
National Centre for Mental Health  
Canolfan Iechyd Meddwl Genedlaethol

# Eating disorders



Ymchwil Iechyd  
a Gofal Cymru  
Health and Care  
Research Wales



Eating disorders are mental illnesses that can present as unhealthy thoughts and feelings about food and eating, leading to drastic changes in behaviour.

Around 1.6m people in the UK are estimated to be affected by eating disorders.

People from all genders, backgrounds, ethnic groups and ages can be affected by eating disorders.

There are many forms of eating disorder, but the most common are binge eating disorder (BED), bulimia and anorexia.

### **Binge eating disorder (BED)**

People with BED regularly eat what most people would consider to be unusually large amounts of food in a short time and feel out of control when doing so. This is often called bingeing.

### **Bulimia nervosa**

People with bulimia also binge on food, but they will then get

rid of the food they have eaten (sometimes called purging) by making themselves vomit or by using laxatives.

### **Avoidant restrictive food Intake disorder (ARFID)**

ARFID is a condition characterised by the person avoiding certain foods or types of food, having restricted intake in terms of overall amount eaten, or both.

### **Anorexia nervosa**

People with anorexia severely restrict the amount of food they eat, often eating less than they need to stay healthy. They can become very focused on their weight and body shape.

Eating disorders can have a significant impact on a person's health and quality of life.

This impact is often also experienced by family members and friends.

The causes of eating disorders are complicated, but research suggests that our life experiences, our psychological state and our genetics all play a part.

## Getting help

The physical effects of eating disorders can be serious so it is important for people affected by them to get help as early as possible.

The first step towards getting help with an eating disorder is to speak to your GP.

Approaching your doctor, either for yourself or someone you care about, can seem like a daunting task. You may feel embarrassed or guilty, or that you're wasting their time.

Don't let these things put you off talking to your GP and asking for help - that's what they're there for.

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For example, if someone believes they need to lose weight, they may feel that purging helps them to do this, despite the negative effect this may have on their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Your doctor will understand this, and it's ok for you to mention that you feel this way.



Your doctor may use a series of questions to help assess whether you are suffering from an eating disorder.

It's important to note that their diagnosis won't just be based on these questions, and you don't have to say yes to all of them to be diagnosed with having an eating disorder.

Think about your answers to these questions before you visit your GP - it could help to make the conversation easier:

- Do you make yourself sick because you feel uncomfortably full?
- Do you worry you have lost control over how much you eat?
- Have you recently lost more than one stone (6kg) in a three-month period?
- Do you believe yourself to be fat when others say you are too thin?
- Would you say that food dominates your life?
- What happens after you speak to your doctor will depend on your needs.

In some cases, your GP will treat you themselves, but if they think that you need specialist help, you may be referred to mental health services.

You may be referred to a specialist eating disorders service if your GP thinks this is necessary.



## Treatments for eating disorders

Everyone experiences eating disorders differently, so treatment is based around each person's needs.

For some people the first step may be to follow a self-help programme, possibly with encouragement and support from a health professional.

There are also different types of talking treatments available for eating disorders depending on your needs.

For example, in moderate to severe cases this could include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or interpersonal therapy (IPT).

CBT is a type of counselling that helps a person to understand and change the way they think and behave.

IPT counselling focuses on issues with interpersonal relationships.

It is important to note that while you can expect some form of talking treatment, not every kind of therapy will be appropriate or available in all cases.

Treatment may also involve careful monitoring of your physical health.

Anyone with an eating disorder may be prescribed medication.







## Tips for people with eating disorders

- Asking for help can be very difficult. Talk to someone you can trust, whether it's a parent, a teacher or a good friend.
- Speaking to your doctor will be easier with their support.
- Recovering from an eating disorder is not easy, and it can take time. Try not to be hard on yourself if you suffer a setback.
- Try to keep doing the things you are interested in, like your hobbies or seeing friends. This can help keep your mind off negative thoughts and habits.
- Learn as much as you can about eating disorders. There are lots of books on the subject, and sources of useful information online (see the list included in this leaflet).
- It can be helpful to know that you're not alone. You can find support groups online - BEAT, the eating disorder charity, run online communities for all ages and for carers and families.

## Tips for families, partners and carers

- If someone you care about confides in you about their eating disorder, try not to get angry or upset with them. It can be very hard to ask for help so be supportive and try to understand.
- Ask your loved one what they do and don't find helpful, as everyone is different.

- Try and keep them included in social activities, even if they don't always take up the invitation.
- Avoid making comments about weight or looking 'healthier'.
- Patience is very important. A person with an eating disorder might not always be open to help. This can be difficult to deal with, but remember it's the illness talking, not the person.

## Our ARFID research

Avoidant restrictive food intake disorder, more commonly known as ARFID, is a condition characterised by the person avoiding certain foods or types of food, having restricted intake in terms of overall amount eaten, or both.

ARFID was recognised as a condition in 2013 and can lead to serious physical and psychological consequences such as malnutrition, tube feeding, and psychosocial distress.

ARFID is a complex disorder and can present in variety of ways, with symptoms ranging from diminished appetite, sensory-based food aversion, and fear of negative consequences associated with eating.

Anyone of any age can have ARFID. It occurs in children, teenagers and adults. ARFID can occur at any weight and varies in different people.

Here at the National Centre for Mental Health, we are currently undertaking research to understand more about ARFID to help provide better treatment for those affected by this condition.

**To find out more, please visit: [ncmh.info/arfid-signup](https://ncmh.info/arfid-signup)**





## Useful websites

### BEAT

The UK's leading eating disorders charity. BEAT offer online support groups, helplines and a library of downloadable information leaflets.

[beateatingdisorders.org.uk](https://beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

### Mind

Information and support along with downloadable leaflets and real people's stories. Search 'eating disorders' from the homepage.

[mind.org.uk](https://mind.org.uk)

### NHS Choices

Online resources including advice for parents and friends on how to support someone who has an eating disorder.

[nhs.uk/eatingdisorders](https://nhs.uk/eatingdisorders)



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## Join our NCMH research community

Join our research community today and help us better understand conditions like eating disorders. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment, and support for people in the future.

Joining our community is easy - it involves completing an online sign-up form which takes about 15 minutes and will ask you about:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To join, visit: [ncmh.info/join](https://ncmh.info/join)

Or scan:



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[www.ncmh.info](https://www.ncmh.info)

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Mae'r wybodaeth hon hefyd ar gael drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg. I ofyn am gopi, cysylltwch â ni.

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