EATING DISORDERS

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

An eating disorder is a complex mental illness characterised by disturbed eating behaviours and extreme concerns about food, eating and body size, shape or weight.

Eating disorders are characterized by an overwhelming, consuming drive to be thin and a morbid fear of gaining weight and losing control over eating.

There can be serious complications associated with an eating disorder which includes increased risk of death, complications with other medical conditions and increased risk of obesity.

TYPES OF EATING DISORDERS

Bulimia

People with bulimia may eat large amounts of food, then purge the food as a way to control their weight. They may do this through vomiting, fasting, excessive exercise or misusing laxatives or other drugs. A person with bulimia is often close to their normal body weight, despite their binge-eating.

Anorexia

A person with anorexia may place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they consume. Often anorexia begins with weight loss, resulting from either dieting or physical illness. Starvation diets and erratic eating patterns may result in person becoming anorexic.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Rapid weight loss or gain or frequent changes in weight
- Obsessive thoughts about food, body size, shape or weight
- Feeling depressed, anxious, irritable or stressed
- Eating food in smaller or larger amounts than normal
- Using food as a way to deal with boredom or stress
- Eating in private or avoiding social situations involving food
- Excessive exercising
Bulimia and anorexia affect the mind and body in a multitude of ways:

**Brain**
- preoccupation with food and weight
- low self-esteem
- anxiety, depression

**Mouth**
- erosion of dental enamel
- swollen jaw, bad breath
- gum disease, tooth decay

**Throat/oesophagus**
- chronic sore throat
- indigestion, heartburn
- reflux, inflamed or rupture of oesophagus

**Heart**
- irregular or slow heartbeat
- cardiac arrest, heart failure
- low blood pressure
- fainting, dizziness

**Stomach and intestines**
- ulcers, pain, stomach rupture
- bowel problems, constipation, diarrhoea, cramps

**Hormones**
- irregular or absent periods
- loss of libido, infertility

**Kidneys**
- dehydration

**Muscles**
- fatigue, cramps
- caused by electrolyte imbalance, tiredness, lethargy

**Skin**
- calluses on knuckles, dry skin

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**GETTING HELP**

**Nutritional Management**
Nutritional management is provided by a dietitian and focuses on creating normal eating patterns. It aims to address fears about food and loss/gain of weight and to offer nutritional advice, eating plan and motivation.

**Support Groups**
There are numerous support group that are offers in local areas to provide support and information to people suffering from eating disorder, it is a great place to access referrals for early intervention and eating disorder prevention.

**Inpatient Program**
Inpatient treatment clinics provide 24-hour care and are usually located in hospitals and private treatment centres. The program aims to achieve medical stabilisations as well as weight restoration.

**Family approaches**
Family approaches are most common among youth suffering from eating disorder. This treatment focuses on involving the whole family as a support network for the person with the disorder. The aim is to treat the person while at the same time offering support and information to family members on how to provide appropriate care.

**Psychotherapy**
There are various types psychotherapy treatments for eating disorders but all of them focus on a person’s thoughts, emotions and pattern of thinking. Cognitive behavioural therapy is the most common model which aims to adjust unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaviour.

**Outpatient Program**
Outpatient services normally involve input from a range of health professionals such as dietitian, nutritionist or a general practitioner.

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For more information on eating disorders, contact:
Mental Health Foundation Australia
www.mhfa.org.au

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