

# Centre for Mental Health

Swinburne University of Technology



## What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are mental health conditions that are associated with disturbances in eating or eating-related behaviours. At times, disturbances in body image are also experienced. The three main eating disorders are anorexia nervosa (AN; see 'Fact sheet for AN'), bulimia nervosa (BN), and binge eating disorder (BED). BN is characterised by frequent episodes of binge eating, followed by compensatory behaviours, such as vomiting and laxative use to prevent weight gain. Body image disturbance is also characteristic of BN, which (unlike AN) is not associated with low body weight. BED, on the other hand, involves recurrent episodes of binge eating, but compensatory behaviours are not used to prevent weight gain, nor is there a disturbance of body image. People with eating disorders often find their conditions distressing, have poor quality of life, and other mental health conditions, including depression or anxiety.

## Prevalence of eating disorders

Over 1 million people in Australia currently have an eating disorder; 1 in 10 of those with BN is male. The gender ratio is less skewed in BED, with a third of affected people being men. The onset of eating disorders tends to occur in mid to late adolescence, or early adulthood.

## Possible causes

The causes of eating disorders remain unknown. Psychological, sociocultural and biological factors are thought to contribute to these conditions. However, unlike BN, which is more prevalent in white females from industrialised societies, BED does not appear to be strongly associated with sociocultural influences, and is seen across different races and ethnic minorities.

## Symptoms of eating disorders

Symptoms vary depending on the type of eating disorder:

- Bulimia nervosa
  - Binge eating
  - Compensatory behaviours to prevent weight gain
  - Body image disturbance
- Binge eating disorder
  - Binge eating
  - No compensatory behaviours
  - No body image disturbance

## Treatment options

Treatment options vary depending on the type of eating disorder. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is typically recommended for BN and BED. Medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), are also sometimes useful.