

*Usdaw*

Campaigning  
For Equality

# Women's Equality Women's Health – Eating Disorders



An advice leaflet  
for Usdaw Members



# Eating disorders

**This leaflet explains the most common forms of eating disorders, highlights the signs and symptoms to be aware of and gives some practical advice on how to approach someone you suspect of suffering from an eating disorder.**

**Eating is influenced by many factors, including appetite, food availability, family, peer and cultural practices.**

**DiETING to a body weight lower than needed for health is heavily promoted by current fashion trends, sales campaigns for special foods, and in some activities and professions.**

**An increasing number of women and men are affected by eating disorders.**

## What is an eating disorder?

- Eating disorders are not a problem with food. They are in fact only a symptom of underlying problems.
- Eating disorders develop as outward signs of inner emotional or psychological distress or problems. They become the way that people cope with difficulties in their life.
- With all eating disorders, weight is the focus of life. By focusing on food, weight and calories, a person is able to block out or numb painful feelings and emotions. Some use food as a way to comfort themselves.
- Eating disorders are complex illnesses where both the disturbed eating pattern as well as psychological aspects need to be treated.
- Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa are two of the most common eating disorders.

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## What is Anorexia Nervosa?

- Literally, Anorexia Nervosa means 'loss of appetite for nervous reasons'. A person suffering from anorexia has in fact lost the ability to allow themselves to satisfy their appetite.
- Anorexics restrict the amount they eat and drink, sometimes to a dangerous level.
- Anorexics consider themselves to be fat, no matter what their actual weight is.
- Anorexics focus on food in an attempt to cope with life, rather than to starve to death. It is a way of demonstrating that they are in control of their body weight and shape.
- Anorexics usually deny that anything is wrong.

## What is Bulimia Nervosa?

- Literally, the term bulimia nervosa means 'the hunger of an ox'. The hunger, however, is an emotional need that cannot be satisfied by food alone.
- Bulimia is characterised by a cycle of binge eating followed by purging to try and rid the body of unwanted calories. This is done by vomiting or taking laxatives (or both) or by working off calories with exercise.
- As with anorexia, people who develop bulimia rely on the control of food and eating as a way of coping with emotional difficulties in their life.
- Bulimia is more difficult to detect than anorexia as the person often will not lose weight so dramatically.
- Unlike anorexics, bulimics do realise they have a problem and are more likely to seek help.

## Approaching someone with an eating disorder

It is important to remember that when you first approach the person you suspect has an eating disorder, they may react with anger or they may deny that anything is wrong.

Do not push the issue. Just let them know that you will always be there for them if they need to talk.

No matter how much you want to help them, remember that only they can make the decision to get help.

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## Do's and don'ts

### Do:

- Avoid talking about food and weight, as these are not the real issues.
- Encourage them to seek help.
- Be patient, recovery takes time.
- Listen to them, do not be quick to give opinions and advice.

### Don't

- Try to force them to eat.
- Comment on their weight or appearance.
- Blame the individual and do not get angry with them.
- Try to take on the role of a therapist.

## Signs and symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa

### Physical

- Extreme weight loss.
- Swollen stomach, face and ankles.
- Dry, rough, discoloured skin.

### Psychological

- Changes in personality and mood swings.
- Denial of the existence of a problem.
- Intense fear of gaining weight, even within the normal weight range according to height.

### Behavioural

- Rituals attached to eating, such as cutting food into tiny pieces.
- Restlessness and hyperactivity.

## Signs and symptoms of Bulimia Nervosa

### Physical

- Frequent weight changes.
- Lethargy and tiredness.
- Swollen salivary glands making the face more round.

### Psychological

- Emotional behaviour and mood swings.
- Anxiety and depression, low self esteem, shame and guilt.
- An obsession with food.

### Behavioural

- Bingeing and vomiting.
- Excessive exercise.
- Secrecy and reluctance to socialise.

# For further information

The following organisation offers a wide range of information on eating disorders:

Beating Eating Disorders  
Wensum House  
103 Prince of Wales Road  
Norwich NR1 1DW

Helpline: 0345 634 1414  
Youth Helpline: 0345 634 7650 (under 18s)  
website: [www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)  
email: [help@b-eat.co.uk](mailto:help@b-eat.co.uk)



# Usdaw contacts

To find out more about the work of the Divisional Equalities Forums and Usdaw's equality work or about joining Usdaw contact:

## South Wales and Western Division

Cardiff Office  
Tel: 029 2073 1131  
email: cardiff@usdaw.org.uk

## Eastern Division

Waltham Cross Office  
Tel: 01992 709280  
email: walthamx@usdaw.org.uk

## Midlands Division

Redditch Office  
Tel: 01527 406290  
email: redditch@usdaw.org.uk

## North Eastern Division

Leeds Office  
Tel: 0113 232 1320  
email: leeds@usdaw.org.uk

## Scottish Division

Glasgow Office  
Tel: 0141 427 6561  
email: glasgow@usdaw.org.uk

## Southern Division

Morden Office  
Tel: 020 8687 5950  
email: morden@usdaw.org.uk

## North West Division

Warrington Office  
Tel: 01925 578050  
email: warrington@usdaw.org.uk

## Equalities Section

Usdaw  
188 Wilmslow Road  
Manchester M14 6LJ  
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[www.usdaw.org.uk/equalities](http://www.usdaw.org.uk/equalities)

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