



Eating Disorders

About more than food



Northern Light[™]

Acadia Hospital



At Northern Light Acadia Hospital, we are dedicated to treating all types of eating disorders. Our approach combines *Intuitive Eating Principles*, *Health At Every Size*®, and *Size Diversity* to help patients develop a healthy relationship with food and their body.

Eating disorders can often be hidden, but bringing them to light can lead to recovery. If you or a loved one is struggling with an eating disorder, know that seeking help is a brave and courageous step and we are here to support you on your journey toward a full and lasting recovery.

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are serious medical conditions that can affect a person's eating behaviors. These disorders have biological influences and are characterized by significant changes in how someone eats. Although many people may be concerned about their health, weight, or appearance from time to time, some people become fixated or obsessed with weight loss, body weight or shape, and/or controlling their food intake.

Eating disorders are not a choice. These disorders can affect a person's physical and mental health. In some cases, they can be life-threatening. With treatment, however, people can recover completely from eating disorders.

Who is at risk for eating disorders?

Eating disorders can affect people of all ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, body sizes, and genders. Even people who appear healthy, such as athletes, can have eating disorders and be extremely ill. People with eating disorders can be all different body shapes and sizes. In other words, you can't tell if someone has an eating disorder by looking at them.

The exact cause of eating disorders is not fully understood. Research suggests a combination of genetic, biological, behavioral, psychological, and social factors can raise a person's risk.

What are the common types of eating disorders?

Common eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating disorder, and avoidant restrictive food intake disorder. Each of these disorders is associated with different, but sometimes overlapping, symptoms. People exhibiting any combination of these symptoms may have an eating disorder and should be evaluated by a healthcare provider.

What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa is a condition where people avoid food, severely restrict food, or eat very small quantities of only certain foods. They also may weigh themselves repeatedly. Even when dangerously underweight, they may see themselves in a larger body.

There are two subtypes of anorexia nervosa: restrictive and binge-purge subtype.

Restrictive: People with the restrictive subtype of anorexia nervosa severely limit the amount and type of food they consume.

Binge-purge: People with the binge-purge subtype of anorexia nervosa also greatly restrict the amount and type of food they consume. In addition, they may have binge-eating and purging episodes — eating large amounts of food in a short time followed by compensatory behaviors which can include excessive exercise, vomiting, and laxative and diuretic use.

Atypical anorexia is an eating disorder that is nearly identical to anorexia. People with atypical anorexia weigh in the “normal” range or live in larger bodies. Atypical anorexia can present with the same physical symptoms as anorexia nervosa and be just as serious.

Symptoms of anorexia nervosa and atypical anorexia include:

- Weight loss
- A relentless pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a healthy weight
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- Distorted body or self-image that is heavily influenced by perceptions of body weight and shape
- Denial of the seriousness of their weight loss



Anorexia nervosa can be fatal. It has an extremely high death rate compared to other mental health disorders. People with anorexia are at risk of dying from medical complications associated with starvation. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people diagnosed with anorexia nervosa.

What is bulimia nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa is a condition where people have recurrent episodes of eating unusually large amounts of food and feeling a lack of control over their eating. Compensatory behaviors follow the binge, which can include forced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives or diuretics, fasting, excessive exercise, or a combination of these behaviors. People with bulimia may appear in all body types.

Symptoms of bulimia nervosa include:

- Chronically inflamed and sore throat
- Swollen salivary glands in the neck and jaw area
- Worn tooth enamel and increasingly sensitive and decaying teeth from exposure to stomach acid when vomiting
- Acid reflux disorder and other gastrointestinal problems
- Intestinal distress and irritation from laxative abuse
- Severe dehydration from purging
- Electrolyte imbalance (too low or too high levels of sodium, calcium, potassium, and other minerals), which can lead to stroke or heart attack

What is binge-eating disorder?

Binge-eating disorder is a condition where people have recurrent episodes of eating unusually large amounts of food and feeling a lack of control over their eating. Unlike bulimia nervosa, periods of binge-eating are not followed by purging, excessive exercise, fasting, or other compensatory behaviors. Binge-eating disorder can lead to weight gain.

Symptoms of binge-eating disorder include:

- Eating unusually large amounts of food in a short amount of time, for example, within two hours
- Eating rapidly during binge episodes
- Eating even when full or not hungry
- Eating until uncomfortably full
- Eating alone or in secret to avoid embarrassment
- Feeling distressed, ashamed, or guilty about eating
- Frequent dieting

Adelaide's story

In April of 2019, Adelaide V. reached a breaking point. Just shy of her 18th birthday, she isolated herself from family and friends and restricted her food intake. Frightened and unsure of what was happening to her body, Adelaide's family reached out to Northern Light Acadia Hospital.



Adelaide was diagnosed with an eating disorder, the first step in what would become a months-long journey that included outpatient treatment at Acadia's Eating Disorders Treatment Program. Adelaide benefitted from one-on-one therapy with a licensed clinical social worker, consultation with a dietitian, and group therapy. "I'm so thankful for the connections I've made and for the people who have helped me to get to where I am," she says. "If not for Northern Light's Eating Disorders Program, I would not be here today."

Now in recovery, Adelaide is thriving, recently graduating with a degree in psychology from College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts.

What is avoidant restrictive food intake disorder?

Avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID), previously known as selective eating disorder, is a condition where people limit the amount or type of food eaten. Unlike anorexia nervosa, people with ARFID do not have a distorted body image or extreme fear of gaining weight. People with ARFID may have a fear of vomiting or choking, or may have significant sensory issues which impact their ability to eat. ARFID is most common in middle childhood and usually has an earlier onset than other eating disorders, however it can affect people of all ages.

Symptoms of ARFID include:

- Upset stomach, abdominal pain, or other gastrointestinal issues with no other known cause
- Limited range of preferred foods that becomes even more limited ("picky eating" that gets progressively worse)
- Dramatic restriction of types or amount of food eaten
- Lack of appetite or interest in food
- Occasionally, weight loss or lack of expected growth



What are the associated health consequences of eating disorders?

Eating disorders can affect every organ system in the body, including the cardiovascular and gastrointestinal systems, and introduce neurological and endocrine concerns. For some people, these illnesses are fatal.

Other health implications:

- Dry skin and brittle hair/hair loss due to low caloric and fat consumption
- Growth of fine, downy hair called lanugo to conserve warmth during periods of starvation
- Kidney failure due to severe, prolonged dehydration
- Decrease in the number of certain types of blood cells because of inadequate nutrition
- Anemia caused by too few red blood cells or too little iron in the diet. Iron deficiency symptoms can include fatigue, weakness, and shortness of breath.
- A decrease in infection-fighting white blood cells can cause anemia
- Tooth enamel loss and cavities due to purging by vomiting

How are eating disorders treated?

Eating disorders can be treated successfully! Early detection and treatment are important for a full recovery.

A person's family can play a crucial role in treatment. Family members can encourage the person with eating or body image issues to seek help. They also can provide support during treatment and can be a great ally to both the individual and the health care provider. Research suggests that incorporating the family into treatment for eating disorders can improve treatment outcomes, particularly for adolescents.



Treatment for eating disorders can include psychotherapy, family therapy, medical care and monitoring, nutritional counseling, medications, or a combination of these approaches.



Typical treatment goals include:

- Restoring adequate nutrition
- Medical stability
- Developing a normal relationship with food
- Improved body image

People with eating disorders may have other mental health disorders (such as depression or anxiety) or problems with substance use. It's critical to treat any co-occurring conditions as part of the treatment plan.

Various approaches can be used to treat eating disorder diagnoses. A common approach to treat anorexia in the pediatric population is Family-Based Therapy. Other approaches to treat all eating disorders include: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for ARFID, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, and Mindfulness Techniques.

Medications may be helpful after being nutritionally rehabilitated; however, in some cases, they may be helpful during the course of treatment.

At Northern Light Health, we believe that recovery is within reach for everyone. No matter where you are on your journey, our dedicated team is here to support and guide you every step of the way. Together, we can make recovery a reality.

If you are in need of mental health or eating disorders support, the following resources may be helpful:

- **Maine Crisis Hotline:** 1.888.568.1112 or dial 9-8-8
- **Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD):** 1.888.375.7767
- **The Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness Helpline:** 1.866.662.1235
- **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA):**
nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-help



For more information, visit:
northernlighthealth.org/EatingDisorders

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