

Eating problems

"I'm not very happy today. Woke up feeling OK then helped my mum with the shopping and bought a lot of binge food. Came home and ate the lot. Went to throw it up, but I really did not have the energy and my throat hurt from yesterday, so I only threw up once.

"Then I went to the swimming pool and swam 140 lengths. I've had my head down the toilet every morning, afternoon and evening. Feel complete and utter rubbish, but wore my smile, so everyone left me alone." Laura, 16

Many young people experience difficulties with eating food at some time in their lives. These can range from not liking foods (which happens to most people) to clinical eating disorders. It is estimated that as many as 1.15 million people in Britain suffer with an eating problem. Approximately 90,000 people are thought to be receiving treatment for either anorexia or bulimia.

ChildLine speaks to over 1,000 young people about an eating problem each year: 99 out of 100 callers are girls. Of those who give their age, we know that most are between 13 and 16 years old. But children as young as 10 and 11 years have phoned ChildLine to talk about eating problems, as well as older teenagers aged 17 and 18.

What are the most common eating problems?

Anorexia nervosa

"I have stopped eating. My teachers and my mum are always telling me off about it. It's the only part of my life I feel in control of. I might have to go into hospital as I haven't eaten for a couple of weeks. Mum just tries to make me eat more and so then I eat less." Iris, 13

People with anorexia nervosa avoid eating and lose a lot of weight. In extreme cases, they can lose as much as 2 stone or 18kg in one month. People with anorexia often feel fat, even when they are very thin. They may use other ways of staying thin, such as exercising too much. They often hide food and

follow very complicated plans to avoid food and appear heavier than they really are. Anorexia sufferers can become very weak and, without special help, some may even die.

Bulimia nervosa

"I can just start eating something small, but then as I eat it, something inside me snaps and...I eat so much. After I've [thrown up and] cleared away the mess and all the food wrappers, I feel so much better, like I've been cleansed – because there's no food inside of me. But I also feel very tired, faint and sometimes tearful." Laura, 16

Bulimia nervosa is when people binge and then make themselves sick to get rid of the food. Some people with bulimia and anorexia also use laxatives. These give you diarrhoea when taken in large doses. People with bulimia may not look overweight or underweight, which can make the problem difficult to recognise.

Repeated bingeing and purging (vomiting and/or taking laxatives) will eventually do serious damage to the body and can be very dangerous.

Compulsive eating

"I'm 13 stone and I want to lose weight, but I need to eat. I get so hungry. I want to be thin so that people will stop calling me names." Darren, 8

Compulsive eating is when people eat much more than their bodies need over a

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long period, or use food to comfort or distract themselves. This can lead to being overweight and to serious medical problems, like heart problems or diabetes.

How do eating problems begin?

Many of the children and young people who talk to ChildLine about eating problems have low self-esteem or live in stressful family situations. Any number of other issues can 'trigger' an eating problem. Often young people tell us about a mixture of problems, such as pressure to be thin, bullying, abuse or the death of someone close.

When young people feel that they have very little control of the events going on around them, an eating problem can make them feel more in control. Without help, the eating problem itself can get out of control. It can damage people's bodies and can leave them feeling unhappy and bad about themselves and others, depressed, and even suicidal.

Callers to ChildLine range from those who are beginning to feel worried about the amount they eat, to a smaller number who may have had a eating disorder for several years, which has made them very ill. ChildLine listens to them all.

Many young people deny their eating problem or try to keep it a secret. But the sooner they accept that they have a problem, the easier it is to help. Help can include anything from talking to friends, family or a confidential counsellor, such as ChildLine, to seeing a doctor or spending time in hospital.

It is important to understand that an eating disorder is not really about food and it is therefore not appropriate to encourage someone with an eating disorder to "eat up". The eating problem is often a mask for other issues, so making the symptoms better for now may not help in the long run.

What do young people tell ChildLine about their eating problems?

- Sarah told a ChildLine counsellor that she started to eat a lot under the pressure of exams. She put on weight and this led to her being teased and called names. She became very embarrassed about her size and said that one of the things that helped

most was to talk to someone who couldn't see her.

- Niri, 15, was doing well at school, had lots of friends and belonged to a drama group; then her family moved to another part of the country. Niri developed anorexia as a way of expressing how very upset she felt about the move.
- Jon phoned ChildLine over many months. He was having medical treatment for bulimia and the whole of his life felt out of control. He told ChildLine that he started bingeing and vomiting after he had been sexually abused. He said, "There is something bad inside me that I need to get out." Jon said that talking to ChildLine helped him to feel more in control of his life and happier about himself.

How can ChildLine help?

ChildLine counsellors listen without blaming or criticising. They take young people's problems seriously.

- It can be easier to talk on the phone than face to face, especially at first. ChildLine counsellors will go at the caller's pace, and will not force the caller to talk about anything they don't want to.
- Supportive family and friends are important, but it often helps to talk to someone who is not personally involved.
- Young people can write or phone, and can phone just once or arrange to speak regularly to the same counsellor over a period of time.
- ChildLine can advise children and young people about their eating problem.
- ChildLine takes children and young people's problems seriously, giving them a chance to talk in confidence about their concerns, however large or small. ChildLine counsellors can also tell them where to go for more information, including local sources of help and advice. This service is free and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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Further information and advice Publications

Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia:

How to Help, Duker, M. and Slade, R.,
Open University Press, 1988

*Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating
Disorders in Childhood and
Adolescence*, Lask, B. and Bryant-Waugh,
R., Psychology Press, 2000

Anorexia Nervosa: The Wish to Change,
Crisp, A. H. Joughin, N. Halek, C. Bowyer,
C., Psychology Press, 1996

*Breaking free from Anorexia Nervosa:
A Survival Guide for Families, Friends
and Sufferers*, Treasure, J.,
Psychology Press, 1997

*Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating – A
Guide to Recovery*,
Cooper, P. and Fairburn, C. Constable,
and Robinson, 1993

*Bulimia Nervosa: Getting Better Bit(e) by
Bit(e): A Survival Kit for Sufferers
of Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating
Disorders*, Schmidt, U. and Treasure, J.,
Psychology Press, 1993

Eating Disorders. A Parent's Guide,
Lask, B. and Bryant-Waugh, R.,
Penguin, 1999

*Framework: Working with Eating Disorders
and Self-Esteem*, Yellowlees, A.,
Heinemann Educational, 2001

*I'm in control: Calls to ChildLine about
eating disorders*, McConville, B., ChildLine,
London, 2003

*What Works with Children and
Adolescents? A Critical Review of
Psychological Interventions with Children,
Adolescents and their Families*, Carr, A.,
Routledge, 2000

beat (previously the Eating Disorders Association)

103 Prince of Wales Road,
Norwich, Norfolk NR1 1DW
Website: www.b-eat.co.uk

Adult helpline: **0845 634 1414**
Monday to Friday 10.30am to 8.30pm
Saturday 1.00pm to 4.30pm
Email: help@b-eat.co.uk

Youth helpline (for children and young
people aged 18 or under): **08456 347650**
Monday to Friday 4.30pm to 8.30pm
Saturday 1.00pm to 4.30pm
Youthline email: fyp@b-eat.co.uk
Youthline text service: **07786 201820**

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ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC.

Registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717.

Please note – all names and identifying details have been changed to protect young people's identities.

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CONTACTING CHIDLIN E

Children can call ChildLine on **0800 1111** (all calls are free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year).

Or write to us at ChildLine, Freepost NATN1111, London E1 6BR; or visit www.childline.org.uk

Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try our textphone service on **0800 400 222**.
Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

We have a special helpline for children and young people living away from home in places such as refuges, boarding schools and young offenders' institutions called The Line on **0800 88 4444**.
Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 2.00pm to 8.00pm

ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS) helps schools set up schemes to encourage children and young people to support each other. For more information call **020 7650 3230**.