

# The Rise of Eating Disorders During the Pandemic

Living with the symptoms of an eating disorder is tough at any time. And the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made the challenge even greater for many people.

“According to the National Eating Disorders Association, hotline calls related to eating disorders are up 70-80% in the last several months,” says Michelle Pearlman, M.D., a gastroenterologist at the University of Miami Health System. “In a survey in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 62% of people in the U.S. with anorexia and a third of those with binge-eating disorder reported worsening of symptoms during the pandemic.”

## What are eating disorders?

They are conditions that involve disturbances in typical eating patterns, as well as unhealthy thoughts regarding body image and food.



The three primary eating disorders, according to the [American Psychiatric Association](#), are:

- anorexia nervosa - becoming severely underweight by taking extraordinary steps to limit calorie intake
- bulimia nervosa - often characterized by "binging and purging" due to guilt over a feeling of lack of control
- binge-eating disorder - these episodes can result from a feeling of lack of control and eating too much, even when you don't feel hungry

## **How the pandemic affects your mental health**

Mental health concerns are the root cause of many eating disorders, according to the [American Psychological Association](#). Anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder are common in these individuals. Today's uncertainties related to falling ill from the coronavirus, getting basic necessities with trips to the store, or even paying the bills have only escalated these concerns.

Staying involved and connected with friends and loved ones is important for people with mental health concerns. The coronavirus has made this more difficult. In turn, this can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and, ultimately, depression.

[Increased media consumption can heighten anxiety](#) and stress in troubling times with the over-saturation of coverage, according to the journal *Eating Disorders*. During the pandemic, the media has also increased messaging related to staying fit and healthy and not gaining the "Quarantine 15." The inability for people to exercise in their usual fashion is another key factor in weight change.

## **Stress may trigger eating disorders during the pandemic**

All of the stressors of today can be overwhelming and lead people into unhealthy patterns.

*Eating gives people a sense of control when many other aspects of their life may*

*seem out of their control.*

“Also, during the pandemic, many people are stuck at home around food all of the time. Many people buy non-perishable food, which is often highly processed, calorie-dense, and devoid of essential nutrients. These foods are very palatable and often trigger overconsumption of calories even when people feel full.”

## How to manage symptoms

People with eating disorders can take positive action steps to manage their symptoms.

- **Establish a routine.**

Even if your daily routine is a little bit different these days, make an effort to establish one that reinforces healthy habits. “Try to get back into a pre-COVID routine,” says Dr. Pearlman. “Schedule lunch breaks and put time for exercise on your calendar like a ‘meeting with yourself.’ If possible, try to work in an area outside of the kitchen.”

- **Don’t stockpile food.**

Packing your cabinets with too much food can lead to unhealthy habits like binge eating or binging and purging.

- **Focus on healthy foods.**

Focus on a healthy, balanced diet rich in lean protein, whole grains, and plentiful fruits and vegetables. If you are anxious about going to the grocery store, check out the increasing number of grocery delivery options.

- **Look for warning signs.**

If a loved may have an eating disorder, check on them. Look for symptoms such as weight changes, restrictive eating habits, fear of eating, and withdrawal from friends, family, or activities.

- **Even during the pandemic, help is out there.**

“Look online for support groups or schedule a telemedicine consultation or an in-person visit with a therapist or a psychiatrist,” says Dr. Pearlman. “Preferably, look for ones that have experience and expertise in treating eating disorders.”

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