

Truth or Myth

There are all too common misunderstandings about eating disorders and those affected by them.
How much do you know about eating disorders?

1. T or M - Eating Disorders are not an illness.

Myth. Eating disorders are a complex medical/psychiatric illness. Eating disorders are classified as a mental illness in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM-IV)*, are considered to often have a biologic basis, and co-occur with other mental illness such as major depression, anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

2. T or M - Eating Disorders are uncommon.

Myth. They are common. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder are on the rise in the United States and worldwide. Among U.S. females in their teens and 20s, the prevalence of clinical and subclinical anorexia may be as high as 15%. Anorexia nervosa ranks as the 3rd most common chronic illness among adolescent.

3. T or M - Eating Disorders are a choice.

Myth. People do not choose to have eating disorders. They develop over time and require appropriate treatment to address the complex medical/psychiatric symptoms and underlying issues.

4. T or M - A person with anorexia never eats at all.

Myth. Most anorexics do eat; however, they tend to eat smaller portions, low-calorie foods, or strange food combinations. The disordered eating behaviors are very individualized. Total cessation of all food intake is rare and would result in death from malnutrition in a matter of weeks.

5. T or M - A person can die from bulimia.

Truth. While the rate of death from bulimia nervosa is much lower than that seen with anorexia nervosa, a person with bulimia can be at high risk for death and sudden death because of purging and its impact on the heart and electrolyte imbalances.

6. T or M - Men who suffer from eating disorders tend to be gay.

Myth. Sexual preference has no correlation with developing an eating disorder.

7. T or M - Eating disorders are about appearance and beauty.

Myth. Eating disorders are a mental illness and have little to do with food, eating, appearance, or beauty. Eating disorders are usually related to emotional issues such as control and low self-esteem and often exist as part of a "dual" diagnosis of major depression, anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

8. T or M - Purging is only throwing up.

Myth. The definition of purging is to evacuate the contents of the stomach or bowels by any of several means. In bulimia, purging is used to compensate for excessive food intake. Methods of purging include vomiting, enemas and laxative abuse, insulin abuse, fasting, and excessive exercise.

9. T or M - Purging is a way of losing weight.

Myth. Purging does not result in ridding the body of ingested food. Half of what is consumed during a binge typically remains in the body after self-induced vomiting. Laxatives result in weight loss through fluids/water and the effect is temporary.

10. T or M – Kids under 15 are too young to have an eating disorder.

Myth. Eating disorders have been diagnosed in children as young as seven or eight years of age. Often the precursor behaviors are not recognized until middle to late teens.

11. T or M – You can't suffer from more than one eating disorder.

Myth. Individuals often suffer from more than one eating disorder at a time. Bulimarexia is a term that was coined to describe individuals who go back and forth between bulimia and anorexia. Bulimia and anorexia can occur independently of each other, although about half of all anorexics become bulimic.

12. T or M – Achieving normal weight means anorexia is cured.

Myth. Weight recovery is essential to enabling a person with anorexia to participate meaningfully in further treatment, such as psychological therapy. Recovering to normal weight does not in and of itself signify a cure, because eating disorders are complex medical/psychiatric illnesses.

13. T or M – Eating disorders are an attempt to seek attention.

Myth. The causes of eating disorders are complex and typically include socio economic, environmental, cultural, and biologic factors. People who experience eating disorders often go to great lengths to conceal it due to feelings of shame or a desire to persist in behavior perceived to afford the sufferer control in life. Eating disorders are often symptomatic of deeper psychological issues such as low self esteem and the desire to feel in control.

14. T or M – Recovery from an eating disorder is rare.

Myth. Recovery can take months or years, but many people eventually recover after treatment. Recovery rates vary widely among individuals and the different eating disorders. Early intervention with appropriate care can improve the outcome regardless of the eating disorder.

15. T or M – You can tell if a person has an eating disorder simply by appearance.

Myth. You can't. Anorexia may be easier to detect visually, although individuals may wear loose clothing to conceal their body. Bulimia is harder to "see" because individuals often have normal weight or may even be overweight. Some people may have obvious signs, such as sudden weight loss or gain; others may not. People with an eating disorder can become very effective at hiding the signs and symptoms. Thus, eating disorders can be undetected for months, years, or a lifetime.