What are eating disorders?
Worries about weight, shape and eating are common especially among teenage girls. Being very overweight or obese can cause a lot of problems, especially with health. Quite often, someone who is overweight can lose weight simply by eating more healthily. It sounds easy, but they may need help to find a way of doing this.

A lot of young people who are not overweight want to be thinner. They often try to lose weight by dieting or skipping meals. For some, worries about weight becomes an obsession. This can turn into a serious eating disorder. This leaflet is about the commonest eating disorders – **anorexia nervosa** and **bulimia nervosa**.

Someone with anorexia nervosa worries all the time about being fat (even if they are skinny) and eats very little. They lose a lot of weight and their period stop. Someone with bulimia nervosa also worries a lot about weight. They alternate between eating next to nothing and then having binges when they gorge themselves. They vomit or take laxatives to control their weight. Both of these eating disorders are much more common in girls. They are very rare in boys.

What are the signs of anorexia or bulimia?

- Weight loss or unusual weight changes.
- In girls, periods being irregular or stopping
- Missing meals, eating very little and avoiding ‘fattening’ foods
- Avoiding eating in public, secret eating, large amounts of food disappearing
- Believing they are fat when underweight
- Exercising excessively
- Becoming pre-occupied with food, cooking for other people
- Going to the bathroom or toilet immediately after meals.
- Using laxatives and vomiting to control weight.

It may be difficult for parents or teachers to tell the difference between ordinary teenage dieting and weight worries and a more serious problem. If the signs continue for more than a few weeks, it is more likely to be a serious problem. If the young person with weight or eating problems also become moody, withdrawn and has difficulty concentrating, they need help.
What effects can eating disorders have?

- Tiredness and difficulty with normal activities
- Damage to health, including stunting of growth and damage to bones and internal organs.
- Loss of periods and risk of infertility
- Anxiety, depression, obsessive behaviour or perfectionism.
- Poor concentration, missing school, college or work
- Lack of confidence, withdrawal from friends
- Dependency or over-involvement with parents instead of developing independence.

Parents find all this very worrying, especially if the young person denies there is a problem and refuses help. It is important to remember that, if allowed to continue unchecked, both anorexia and bulimia can be life-threatening conditions. Over time, they are harder to treat and the effects become more serious.

What causes eating disorders?

Eating disorders are caused by a number of different things. Worry or stress may lead to comfort eating. This may cause worries about getting fat. Dieting and missing meals lead to craving for food, loss of control and over-eating. Anorexia or bulimia can develop as a complication of more extreme dieting, perhaps triggered by an upsetting event, such as family breakdown, death or separation in the family, bullying at school or abuse. More ordinary events, such as the loss of a friend, a teasing remark or school exams, may also be the trigger in a vulnerable person.

Some people are more at risk than others. Risk factors include being female, being previously overweight and lacking self-esteem. Sensitive or anxious individuals who are having difficulty becoming independent are also more at risk. The families of young people with eating disorders often find change or conflict particularly difficult and may be unusually close or protective.

If you think a young person may be developing an eating disorder, it is worth asking them what about whether they have worries which could have altered their appetite or weight. They may admit they are spending a lot of time worrying about their appearance and thinking about food. Others will deny any problem and say they are fine. They will not want you to interfere with their eating and you should respect this and treat them as normally as possible. Pressure may make matters worse. However they may be interested in how to gain more control over their weight and eating and in how to prevent more serious problems. They may then listen to advice from someone they respect. These simple suggestions are useful to help young people to maintain a healthy weight and avoid eating disorders:
• Eat regular meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner
• Try to eat a ‘balanced’ diet – one which contains all the types of food your body needs.
• Include carbohydrate foods such as bread, rice, pasta or cereals with every meal
• Do not miss meals – long gaps encourage overeating
• Avoid sugary or high-fat snacks
• Take regular exercise
• Try not to be influenced by other people skipping meals or commenting on weight.

**When professional help is needed**
When eating problems make it difficult to take a normal part in family meals and if they start to dominate daily life it is important to seek professional advice. Your family doctor will be able to advise you about what specialist help is available locally and will be able to arrange a referral. If the symptoms are fairly new and not severe the young person may find it helpful to talk to an experienced counsellor, school nurse or a dietician. If there are no signs of improvement your doctor will be able to refer you for more specialist advice from the local child and adolescent mental health service. This service usually includes psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, nurses and social workers.

A **child and adolescent psychiatrist** is a medically qualified doctor who is trained to assess different types of eating disorders and to help young people and their families find ways to overcome them and avoid serious complications. They will want to meet all the family in order to find the best way of helping the young person at home. They will check the teenager’s weight regularly, help them to find ways of getting their weight and eating back under control as well as providing support for parents. They will support the young person in leading as normal a life as possible and may see them on their own to help with problems which may have caused the eating disorder.

If the eating disorder causes physical ill health it is essential to get medical help quickly. Your family doctor can advise about whether admission to hospital is needed. If the young person receives help from a specialist early on, admission to hospital is unlikely. It is also more likely that they will be able to recover fully over time.
Useful information

Eating Disorders Association
Youth Helpline: 01603 765050

Young Minds Parent Information Service
102 – 108 Clerkenwell Road,
LONDON EC1M 5SA
Tel. No: 0800 018 2138
Website: http://www.youngminds.org.uk

Reference: Mental Health and Growing Up Factsheet 28 Royal College of Psychiatrists