Normal, Healthy Eating & Eating Disorders

What is normal, healthy eating?
Normal healthy eating is not only about what we eat, but also how we eat, why we eat and the attitudes that we have towards food and eating. There is no right way to eat normally, it differs for everyone and depends on a person’s physical, cultural, lifestyle and emotional needs. Some general guidelines however, apply to everyone.

Normal, healthy eating is:
• being flexible in what and when you eat;
• eating regularly throughout the day in response to physical hunger;
• eating the quantity of food that satisfies you;
• giving yourself permission to eat foods you enjoy;
• balancing nutrition and enjoyment through consumption of a variety of foods;
• acknowledging food as an important part of your social life; and
• accepting some amount of emotional eating as normal.
For some, normal healthy eating is not easy, particularly if you have become dissatisfied with your body weight, shape or appearance.

Do you like your body?
Many people don’t. This is understandable given that we are bombarded with images in advertising and the media of the ‘ideal’ body. Sometimes it is easy to forget that we are all different and have a unique shape and size.

We may:
• become preoccupied with what we don’t like about our bodies and ignore positive qualities;
• constantly diet in an attempt to mould our bodies into the ‘ideal’ shape; or
• feel guilty and anxious about food.

What can you do?
• Do nice things for yourself regularly.
• Enjoy being in your body – do things you like such as dancing, walking, relaxing, or taking a bath.
• Start doing things you have been putting off until you are thinner.
• Wear clothes you enjoy and feel comfortable in.
• Challenge common stereotypes about being fat and thin in your daily life.
• Get support from people who accept you as you are.
• Avoid restrictive dieting – dieting can set up negative feelings towards food.

Unfortunately, some people become so unhappy or dissatisfied with their body weight and/or shape that they make dramatic changes to their eating behaviour and, in severe cases, develop an eating disorder.
Signs and symptoms of an eating disorder
The main eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder. Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorders (OSFED) and Disordered Eating are also recognised eating disorders. Although there are differences across the conditions, if you notice a number the symptoms below in yourself or someone you care about, this might be a flag that professional support and help is needed.

Emotional
- Intense fear of gaining weight or being fat
- Distorted perception of body size and weight
- Expressing guilt, shame, or disgust about eating
- Feeling irritable, moody, depressed, sad, angry, and/or tearful
- Heightened feelings of anxiety or irritability around meal time
- Experience of extreme
- Low self esteem and feelings of shame, self-loathing or guilt
- Extreme sensitivity to comments about food, weight, body shape and exercise

Physical
- Excessive weight loss, weight gain or weight fluctuations
- Possible loss of menstrual periods in females or decreased libido in males
- Sensitivity to cold, even in warm weather
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling tired, dizzy or faint
- Compromised immune system (getting sick more often)
- Facial changes (e.g. looking pale, sunken eyes) or fine hair appearing on face and body

Behavioural
- Unusual eating habits such as restricting and elimination of major food groups, counting calories and fasting,
- Obsessive rituals around food preparation and eating
- Withdrawing or disappearing around meal times and situations involving food
- Over-eating on a regular basis
- Extreme physical activity or following strict exercise routines
- Repetitive or obsessive behaviours related to body shape and weight, such as weighing repeatedly, obsessively looking in mirrors, measuring self or pinching waist or wrists
- Use of laxatives, diuretics, self-induced vomiting
- Fasting or chronic retrained eating
- Regular trips to the bathroom
- Self-induced vomiting

Thoughts / Perceptions
- Black and white thinking, where food or types of food (e.g. carbohydrates or “fatty” foods) are categorised as an extreme of either good or bad, clean or dirty. Especially when you cannot see them as something in-between.
- Preoccupation with food and eating and/or body shape and weight
- Self-defeating and intrusive thoughts (e.g. "I'm a failure", "I'm fat", "I'm worthless", "no one will love me like this")
- Excessive guilt about eating and exercise.
- Extreme dissatisfaction with body size and shape, and weight
- Belief that you will feel better if you are thinner or more muscular

What causes eating disorders?
A number of factors are thought to affect the development of eating disorders. Often eating disorders are the result of a combination of these:
- biological factors such as physical changes associated with adolescence
- social factors including pressure to achieve and succeed
- psychological factors such as major life changes, and
- personality characteristics including perfectionism and low self-esteem
How to help a family or friend with an eating disorder

If you are concerned that a relative or friend might be suffering from an eating disorder, the following points may help:

**Do**
- examine your feelings and thoughts about eating disorders
- inform yourself of the disorders and their treatments and help others to understand the disorder
- let him or her know that you are concerned about them
- try to understand the eating disorder as a coping strategy for dealing with painful emotions and experiences
- support the person to make his or her own discoveries and learn about themselves
- only do what you feel capable and comfortable with
- remember that the recovery process can be slow, and
- encourage the person to seek professional support

**Don’t**
- let these issues dominate your relationship with the person
- force the person to eat
- try to control their behaviour (this can intensify the problem)
- take on the role of therapist, or
- blame the person.

Where can I get more information or help?

If your issues with food and body weight are severe and/or prolonged, or are getting in the way of your life and your studies, consult your general medical practitioner as a first step. Other resources and supports include:

**University Counselling Service:** [utas.edu.au/counselling](utas.edu.au/counselling)
Free personal counselling (face-to-face, video, phone, instant chat and email) appointments are available with experienced mental health clinicians between 8.30am and 5.00pm weekdays. You can discuss concerns about body weight, shape, or appearance and address unproductive thoughts about food and eating.
Online bookings: [utas.edu.au/appointments](utas.edu.au/appointments)
Phone: 1800 817 675
After Hours Crisis counselling support phone 1300 511 709 or text 0488 884 168

**Headspace:** [headspace.org.au](headspace.org.au)
Information, resources and support for people 25 years and under. Includes online and phone support through headspace, as well as face-to-face service at a centre near you.

**Butterfly Foundation:** [thebutterflyfoundation.org.au/](thebutterflyfoundation.org.au/)
National service offering free phone and online counselling for people living in Australia affected by eating disorders. Resources and information are also available online.
Phone: 1800 334673

**Eating Disorders Victoria:** [eatingdisorders.org.au](eatingdisorders.org.au)
Information and support for those affected by eating disorders.
Phone (03) 9417 6590

**Centre for Clinical Interventions:** [www.cci.health.wa.gov.au](www.cci.health.wa.gov.au)
Free self-help information on a range of mental health presentations.

You can also look for ‘Rise up and Recover’, ‘Before I eat’ and ‘If not dieting’ in your mobile app store.