

The Washington State Department of Health  
Youth Advisory Council (YAC) presents:



# a guide to understanding eating disorders

This guide helps teens and young adults know and understand the signs of eating disorders. You will also find ways to get support for yourself or someone you care about.

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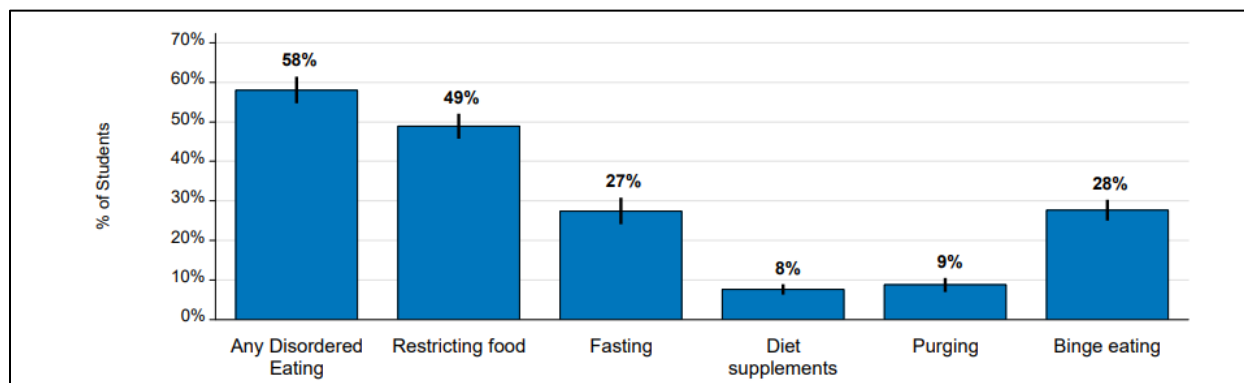


# Eating disorders in Washington teens

Every 2 years, students in Washington public schools answer questions about their overall health and behaviors in the [Healthy Youth Survey](#). In 2023, the survey asked new questions about disordered eating.

**More than half of the students** across all grades said they experienced some disordered eating behavior. In the survey, disordered eating behaviors referred to several ways of trying to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight. These include fasting, taking diet supplements like pills or other products, purging, and binge eating.

Below is a summary of responses from 10th grade students. 58% of people who took the survey reported disordered eating behavior. The most common disordered eating behavior was restricting food, which 49% of students who took the survey reported. You can find more results at [AskHYS.net](#).



## Disordered Eating Behaviors, Grade 10, 2023 ([AskHYS.net](#))<sup>1</sup>

### It's true: Key facts about eating disorders

- **Anyone can have an eating disorder.** They do not discriminate and can affect people of any age, shape, sexuality, cultural background, or socioeconomic group.
- **An Eating Disorder and disordered eating are different things.** Disordered eating is a range of irregular eating behaviors that may not meet the criteria for a specific eating disorder diagnosis, but still negatively affect a person's physical or mental health.<sup>2</sup>

- **Your body size or weight doesn't define your health.** Everyone deserves a positive relationship with their body.
- **Boys and men experience eating disorders too,** though they're often under-recognized and under-served.
- **They're common.** Eating disorders are the 3rd most common long-term illness in teens. About 22% of children and adolescents worldwide display symptoms of disordered eating.<sup>3</sup>
- **LGBTQIA2S+ teens are at increased risk.** They're more likely to develop an eating disorder than their straight, cisgender peers due to the unique stressors linked to bias and discrimination against sexually and gender diverse youth.<sup>4</sup>



Types of eating disorders	Symptoms and characteristics
<b>Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorders (OSFED)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most common eating disorder diagnosis</li> <li>• Does not strictly meet the criteria for another specific eating disorder</li> </ul>
<b>Anorexia Nervosa</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of gaining weight</li> <li>• Seeing their body in a distorted manner</li> <li>• Limiting calories or avoiding certain foods</li> <li>• Exercising more than recommended</li> <li>• Taking laxatives or diet pills</li> </ul>
<b>Bulimia Nervosa</b>	<p><b>Bingeing, then purging</b></p> <p>Binge-eating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eating a large amount in a short period of time</li> <li>• Eating even when full and unable to stop</li> </ul> <p>Purging</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vomiting</li> <li>• Exercising more than recommended</li> <li>• Not eating for a long time</li> <li>• Taking laxatives or diet pills</li> </ul>
<b>Binge-Eating</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Binge episodes only</li> <li>• Eating alone or in secret</li> <li>• A sense of lack of control during the binge episode</li> <li>• Compulsive overeating shares similarities</li> </ul>
<b>Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding types and restricting amounts of food</li> <li>• Being uncomfortable with food texture, smell, taste, or appearance</li> <li>• Worrying about choking, vomiting, or having stomach problems after eating</li> <li>• Not having enough nutrients</li> <li>• Faltering growth</li> </ul>

\*Not related to concerns about weight gain or body image. Referral to psychologist may help.

## Why are eating disorders more common in teens?

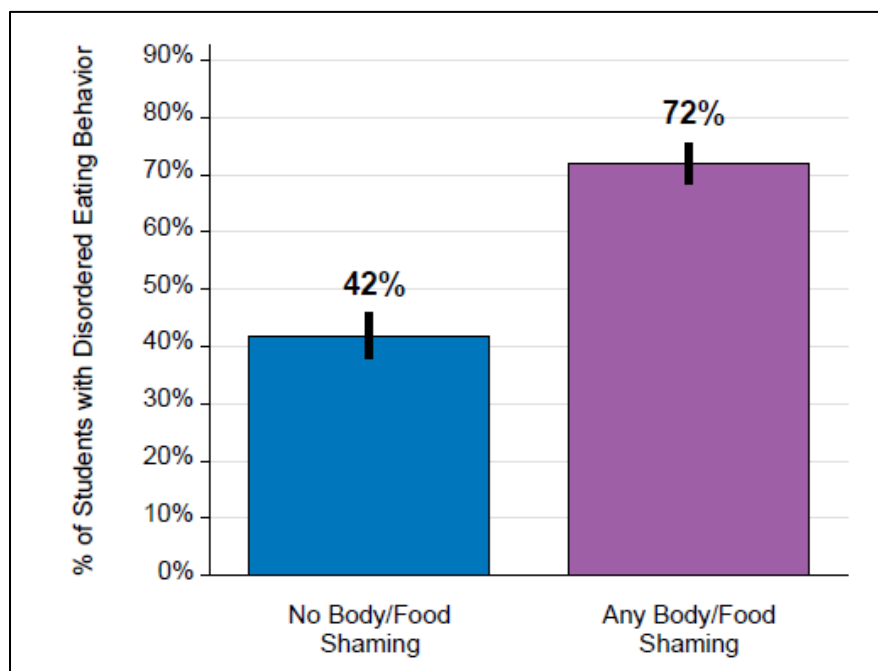
Teens often experience eating disorders and disordered eating symptoms due to:

- Peer pressure
- Family pressure
- Sociocultural pressures and expectations
- Environmental factors

These pressures, along with rapid growth during puberty, can increase the chances of teens experiencing eating disorders or their symptoms.

Food and body shaming may also be connected to disordered eating. In the 2023 Healthy Youth Survey, students were asked about their experience of food or body shaming. The bar chart below shows that disordered eating was more common among students who also reported food and body shaming.

### Statewide Relationship between Body/Food Shaming and Any Disordered Eating Behavior, Grade 10, 2023 ([AskHYS.net](https://askhys.net))<sup>1</sup>



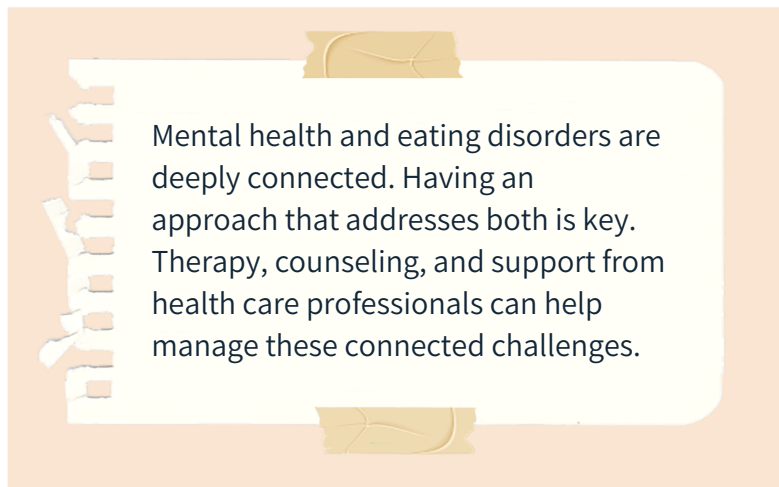
## Eating Disorders and mental health connection

Eating disorders are mental health conditions that affect your relationship with food and how you perceive yourself. They affect your physical and emotional health, and can be life-threatening in extreme cases.<sup>5</sup>

Eating disorders can also relate to compulsive behaviors. A person may use food to cope with emotional distress or sudden life events.

Many people with eating disorders experience other mental health issues like:

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- Substance use
- Thoughts about suicide
- Trauma



## The role of diet culture

Diet culture and its messages are everywhere. These messages are reflective of society's obsession with thinness, dieting, and weight loss, often promoted by restrictive eating and extreme exercise. Social standards for appearance, health, and fitness narrowly define what we believe is acceptable.

Examples of harmful diet culture beliefs about body image, self-worth or food:

- Believing certain body shapes or types are better than others
- Tying weight to health or moral values (e.g. discipline, self-control)
- Setting unrealistic body goals
- Using labels to talk about certain foods. This includes considering food as pure or unpure, junk, clean, toxic, "cheat" foods, or for "cleansing"
- Avoiding food groups labeled as "bad," "unhealthy," or "horrible for your health"
- Feeling shame or having a negative attitude about your or others' body size or weight

Messages that promote a certain body type or shame other body types can contribute to eating disorders. They can harm your relationship with your body and food.

## Social media and body shaming

Social media platforms can make it easy to body shame someone—publicly or in private. It can also lead to unrealistic body image and standards. Here's a few ways this may happen:

### What is body shaming?

It happens when someone criticizes or mocks another person's physical appearance.

- Constant comparison
- People can feel more anonymous, making it easier to leave unkind comments
- Cyberbullying and harassment
- Editing photos and adding filters that distort reality
- Promoting false and inaccurate trends or opinions from online influencers
- Treating people badly because of their weight

**Body shaming doesn't just happen online. It can also come from other sources that impact our thoughts and lead to disordered eating:**

- Television
- Movies
- Magazines
- Family
- Teachers
- Influencers or celebrities
- Healthcare systems
- Peers
- Community

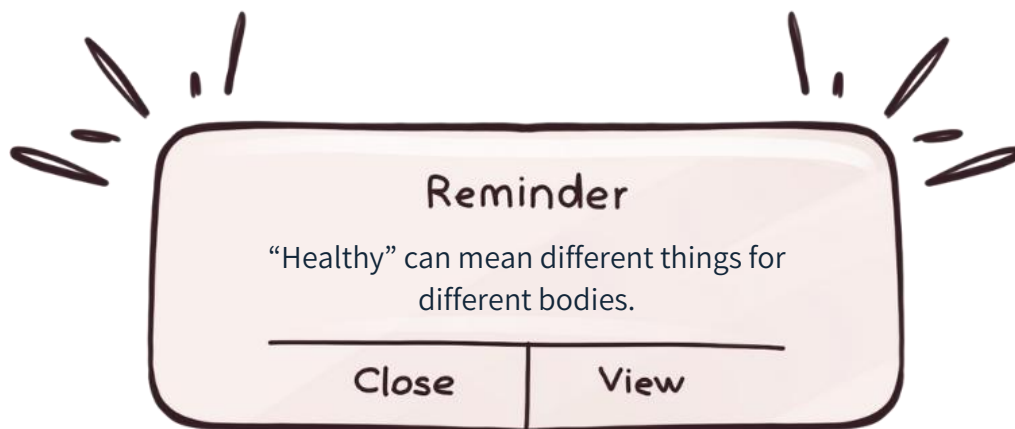


## Know the signs - Food

People with eating disorders often have disordered thoughts about food and eating. These thought patterns can drive people's decisions and behaviors about the types of food they eat, how much they eat, and their body image. These thoughts are often responses and tools for survival when someone feels unsafe, rejected, overwhelmed, or like they don't fit in.

Disordered thoughts and behaviors can also negatively interfere with a person's daily life and make them feel disconnected or that they don't have any control. These thoughts and behaviors can come up in different ways like:

- Obsessive calorie counting, measuring, or weighing food
- Rigid meal planning or removing whole food groups from your diet
- Creating strict dietary or exercise rules for yourself
- Fasting, purging, or vomiting
- Feelings of guilt or shame around eating, or thinking about food frequently throughout the day
- Having a hard time eating in public, or feeling like you need to hide what you're eating
- Making food but not eating it yourself



Food is a source of fuel and well-being. Your body needs food to work, grow, and thrive.



All foods can fit within your diet! People's food choices reflect their background, culture, needs, resources, taste preference, desire and pleasure.



**Food shaming** is rooted in the idea that some foods are morally better than others. Yes, some foods are more nutritious than others. But food shaming blames and shames people for their food choices by deeming them morally bad based on what they choose to eat.

When people shame others based on food choices, they often don't take into consideration the reasons people choose food. Reasons can be based on access, culture, or affordability. Take care not to rely on your biases and assumptions. When possible, learn about different cultures and related foods.

**Language matters:** The words we use to talk about food shape how we think about it. Using accurate and neutral words can help build a better relationship with food.

Instead of negative labels, consider describing food that better reflects specific characteristics, such as:

- Whole fruits and vegetables, frozen, canned or pre-packaged foods
- More or less nutrient dense
- Whole grains or refined grains
- Higher or lower in fiber, salt, saturated fat, and more

## Know the signs – Body and physical health

How you feel about your body can impact your overall health. Many people have a complicated relationship with their body.

**Bodies come in different shapes and sizes, and every body deserves care and respect.** Any number on a weighing scale does not define you. There are dozens of ways to measure health, and it's important to recognize that weight alone is not a reliable indicator of overall health.



## What are body dissatisfaction<sup>6</sup> and body dysmorphia<sup>7</sup>?

**Body dissatisfaction** is feeling unhappy or having negative thoughts about your own body.

**Body Dysmorphia** is focusing on perceived flaws in your physical appearance that others don't notice. Both are influenced by many factors, including our environment.

While weight and body size don't define health, there are some physical signs that might suggest an eating disorder. These include:<sup>5</sup>

- Brittle nails or thinning hair
- Headaches, dizziness, or fainting
- Feeling cold all the time
- Heart palpitations or racing heart
- Stomach pain, bloating, gas, or constipation
- Loss of balance, instability, or muscle weakness
- Numbness or tingling in hands or feet

## Know the signs – Motivated movement

Being active and moving our bodies has many benefits, but it can be harmful if tied to a disordered relationship with intense physical activity and food.

Here are signs your relationship with movement might need attention:

- Exercising to “make up” or compensate for what you ate
- Feeling like you can't skip a workout, even if you're tired or need rest
- Prioritizing exercise to control your weight or meet unrealistic goals

Instead of focusing on weight control or calorie burning, consider movement that feels good and supports your overall health. Joyful, mindful movement like dancing, walking, or stretching, can:

- Boost your energy levels
- Help improve sleep
- Reduce stress
- Help improve your mood and your relationship to self

Exercise should help make you feel stronger and happier—not stressed or guilty.



## Finding support

Starting a conversation about disordered eating can be challenging, but asking for the support you need is important. You don't have to do this alone.

Here are a few ways to start:

- **Reach out to those that know you best.** Sharing with a friend, family member, teacher or other trusted individual can make it easier to get the support you need.
- **Set boundaries.** Let people know what kind of support works for you. For example, what do you want your friends to say or not say if you are experiencing disordered thoughts?
- **Let friends and family know how to check-in with you.** How do you want to seek support—a group meeting, one-on-one, verbally, or text?
- **Challenge stereotypes and harmful language.** Negative comments, body-shaming, or food-shaming are not helpful. Encourage those around you to use neutral language about food and respect bodies of different weights and sizes.
- **Work with a professional.** If possible, find and work with someone who can support and help manage your health condition. For example, are you able to talk openly with your pediatrician or primary care provider about your health condition(s)?
- **There are more resources.** If you feel your pediatrician doesn't have the tools to support you, then consider other resources and professionals with specialties in eating

disorders. You can check out the [Health at Every Size® Healthcare Provider Listing](#), or the Washington State Department of Health's [Guide to Understanding Eating Disorders in Adolescents](#), which has a list of treatment centers located in Washington. You can also search for dietitians in Washington state through the [Nutrition Network](#).

You have the right to be treated with respect and seek care from a provider who listens and respects your needs.

## Moving towards recovery

For anyone experiencing disordered eating or with eating disorders, recovery is possible, and seeking help early can help improve the outcome.

Below are suggestions for positive changes to help build a stronger foundation for recovery:

- **Create positive food experiences.** Work on developing a positive relationship with food by learning to cook, enjoying the food you make, or starting a garden.
- **Find supportive communities.** Share or eat meals with loved ones. Be fully present.
- **Don't skip meals.** Try to avoid skipping meals and use snacks to make sure you get enough to eat. Eating regularly and consistently throughout the day can help make sure your body gets the energy and nutrients it needs.
- **Remember to hydrate.** Hydration is also important.
- **Focus on food pleasure.** Try to eat a variety of foods for diet diversity and to make meals more interesting, try new flavors and textures.
- **Eliminate rigid rules** and practice flexibility.
- **Practice self-care.** Focus on activities that boost your confidence, build on your strengths, and improve your well-being.
- **Find positive influences,** role models, and supportive communities.
- **Reduce social media time** or time with people that promote negative body images.
- **Remind yourself: You are enough.** Recovery takes time and you deserve it!



# Resources for help

If you or someone you know needs help with eating disorders, these can help:

For peer & professional support:

- [National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders \(ANAD\)](#)
- [988 Lifeline](#)
  - Note that if someone's life is in danger, 988 crisis counselors will activate 911.
- [Crisis Text Line](#)
- [National Alliance for Eating Disorders: Support Groups](#)
- [Join Our Table: A Meal Support Podcast for Eating Disorder Recovery](#)
- [Project HEAL: 30+ Free, Identify-Specific Eating Disorder Support Groups](#)
- [Project HEAL: Meal Support Program](#)

For education and more:

- [Academy for Eating Disorders \(AED\)](#)
- [National Alliance for Eating Disorders](#)
- [National Eating Disorders Association: Eating Disorders & Anxiety Disorders](#)

For personal stories of recovery:

- [ANAD Stories: Stories of Healing and Support](#)
- [@iamchrissyking](#) on Instagram
- [@julissas.recovery](#) on Instagram
- [@platebyplateapproach](#) on Instagram
- [@bodyimage\\_therapist](#) on Instagram
- [@drjoshuawolrich](#) on Instagram
- [@aaronfloresrdn](#) on Instagram
- [@kentthomasmsw](#) on Instagram

Social media can be tricky when you're recovering from an eating disorder. On one hand, it can be a great place to find community and be less alone. On the other, some content can make it harder to feel good in your body. It's OK to be selective—follow people who help you feel supported and create a positive relationship with food and yourself. Don't be afraid to unfollow or mute accounts that don't.

While we provide resources to support people as they develop a healthy relationship with social media, DOH does not endorse any social media creators.

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