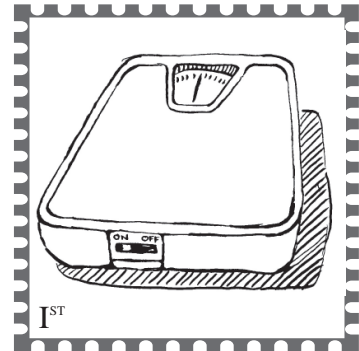


# Worries about weight

## Factsheet for young people

### About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at some of the reasons why people worry about their weight, and offers advice about how to maintain a normal and healthy weight and not let these worries get out of control.



### Introduction

Most of us, at some time in our lives, feel unhappy about the way we look and try to change it. Being smaller, shorter, or less well-developed than friends or brothers and sisters can make us feel anxious and lacking in confidence. So can being teased about size and weight. Many of us have an idea of the size and shape we would like to be.

Our ideas about what looks good are strongly influenced by fashion and friends. You might compare yourself with the pictures in magazines. The models in these magazines are often unhealthily thin. You may then worry that you are fat, even if your weight is normal for your age and height. There are a variety of sizes and shapes that are within the normal, healthy range. If you're interested, there are tables showing normal height and weight. Ask your school nurse, doctor or library. Your weight, like your height and looks, depends a lot on your build, your genes and your diet.

### Staying a healthy, normal weight

Our bodies need a healthy diet, which should include all the things you need to develop normally – proteins, carbohydrates, fats, minerals and vitamins. Cutting out things you might see as fattening, such as carbohydrates or fats, can stop your body from developing normally.

There are some simple rules that can help you to stay a healthy weight. They sound quite easy, but might be more difficult to put into practice. You can ask your family and friends to help you to stick to these rules – and it might even help them to be a bit more healthy!

- Eat regular meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- Include carbohydrate foods such as bread, potatoes, rice or pasta with every meal.
- Try to eat at the same times each day. Long gaps between meals can make you so hungry that you eventually eat far more than you need to.
- Get enough sleep.
- Avoid sugary or high-fat foods and junk foods. If you have a lunch of crisps, chocolate and a soft drink, it doesn't feel as if you're eating much, but it will pile on the pounds. A sandwich with fruit and milk or juice will fill you up, but you are much less likely to put on weight – and it's better for your skin.
- Take regular exercise. Cycling, walking or swimming are all good ways of staying fit without going over the top.
- Try not to pay too much attention to other people who skip meals or talk about their weight.

If you follow these suggestions, you will find it easier to control your weight, and you won't find yourself wanting sweet foods all the time.

### Miracle cures – do they work?

There seems to be a new one of these almost every week. Sadly, they often do more harm than good.

- Crash diets don't help you to keep your weight down. In fact, they might make you put on weight after a while. At worst, they can be dangerous.
- Exercise helps, but it's got to be regular and increased only gradually. Too much exercise, or too much too soon, can damage your body.
- Laxatives might help you feel less guilty and bloated. Unfortunately, they don't reduce weight and can upset your body chemistry.
- 'Slimming pills' can't make you thinner. They might make you feel a bit less hungry, but unfortunately, they can also harm your health.

## Common eating problems

Problems or pressures at school, with friends, or at home, are common. Your appetite can be affected by stress, pressure, worry or tiredness. Some people turn to food for comfort. This can lead to eating more than we need, and can make us put on weight. It's easy to start worrying about getting fat and we find ourselves eating even more to comfort ourselves. It becomes a vicious circle. 'Comfort foods' often contain a lot of fat or sugar – sweets, biscuits, chocolate, cakes and pastries. It can be helpful to keep a diary of what you eat to make sure that you don't slip into this.

If you are unhappy or stressed, it can be easy to focus on your weight and eating habits instead of the things that are bothering you. If this goes on for long enough, you might develop an eating disorder. The most common eating disorder is becoming overweight (*obesity*). Other eating disorders are less common. *Anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia* occur most often among girls.

If worries have altered your appetite or weight, it will help to talk to someone (see Factsheet 32 on coping with stress).

### Sources of further information

- Eating Disorders Association. 103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW. Adult Helpline: 0845 634 1414; Youth Helpline: 0845 634 7050; Textphone 01603 753322; www.edauk.com.
- YoungMinds provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information 0800 018 2138; www.youngminds.org.uk.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

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## Signs of an eating disorder

With *anorexia nervosa*:

- you will feel you are fat and will avoid eating, even though you aren't actually overweight
- you feel guilty when you eat
- you avoid food, lose a lot of weight and become extremely thin.

Strangely, the thinner you get, the fatter you feel! We don't fully understand why this happens, but it makes the eating disorder harder to overcome.

People with anorexia usually remain very active and say they are well, even though they become so thin that they avoid undressing in front of others or wear loose clothes to hide their size. Anorexia nervosa can be dangerous if it gets out of control. If you are a girl, and your periods have stopped, this is a danger sign that means you need help right away (this won't happen if you are on the pill – so if you are, don't wait for this).

If you don't eat much, you can feel like you are starving! You may then find yourself bingeing – eating lots of food very quickly. Bingeing also happens in an eating disorder known as *bulimia*. With bulimia:

- you avoid foods like chocolates, cakes or biscuits, except when you binge
- you feel fat, guilty and ashamed when you binge
- you try to get rid of the food by being sick or using laxatives. It usually doesn't make much difference to your weight, but can damage your health and take up a lot of time and energy.

Some people have both anorexic and bulimic symptoms.

## Getting help

If you are worried about your weight or feel you might have an eating disorder, you should get some help. Talk to:

- a member of the family
- a teacher or school nurse
- a counsellor or social worker
- your general practitioner.

Your general practitioner or practice nurse is the best person for basic information and advice on diet and weight. If you need more specialist help, they can refer you to a specialist or suggest that you see a professional at your local child and adolescent mental health service. This is a team of specialists including child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists and specialist nurses. They will help you to regain control of your eating and your weight.

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