

# Autism & Eating Disorders

This factsheet is for:

- Autistic Adults,
- Parents & Carers and
- Professionals



## Summary:

Eating disorders are a mental illness causing an unhealthy relationship with food leading to other health problems. Autistic people are particularly likely to have an eating disorder for a variety of reasons, and this can have a major impact on overall health. Professional help is essential.

Eating disorders are mental illnesses. As with many other mental health conditions, autistic people may be more likely to have an eating disorder than others.

An eating disorder is an illness related to an unhealthy view of food. Sufferers can eat too much, too little, or become fixated on weight and the appearance of their body. These disorders can take over every aspect of their lives, and, because food is so closely related to physical and mental health, their effects can be devastating and sometimes fatal.

The causes of an eating disorder in an autistic person may be quite different from in others, where for others weight and appearance are often the main drivers. Some autistic people are very sensitive to textures, flavours and smells, including food, which can lead to them having very limited diets. Other autistic people may become obsessed with managing their diet or following eating routines that do not meet their dietary needs as part of their strategy for dealing with stress in other areas of their lives. Some may not be able to process their sense of hunger properly, perhaps feeling hungry too much or almost never. All of these issues can have profound impacts on the diets of autistic people, and can lead to eating disorders.

Eating disorders take a number of forms, including Anorexia Nervosa, where someone strives to keep their weight as low as possible, and Bulimia, where overeating can be followed by harmful efforts to make up for this by vomiting or use of laxatives. Binge eating disorder involves regular consumption of excessive amounts of food in a short time. But an eating disorder need not meet any of these identified conditions and can still be very serious.

As much of our physical health is closely related to our diets (among other things), eating disorders can and do cause many other problems, including hallucinations, exhaustion, dizziness and hair loss.

It is essential to seek professional medical help to address an eating disorder, and to let your doctor know that you are autistic. Having an eating disorder is nothing to be ashamed of, and seeking the help you need is not a weakness.