

Understanding Eating Disorders During the Midlife Transition

Menopause is a natural part of life that brings changes to your body, emotions, and eating habits. Hormonal shifts, weight changes, and new challenges during this time may affect how you feel about your body and lead to or trigger unhealthy eating patterns or even eating disorders. Studies show nearly 8% of women aged 40 and above meet the requirements for an eating disorder.

Menopause Basics

Menopause happens in three phases: **perimenopause**, **menopause**, **postmenopause**. Each phase can bring changes that affect your eating habits. Perimenopause usually begins in your mid-to-late 40s and lasts a few years. Menopause happens when you've gone 12 months in a row without a period, typically between ages 45 and 58. Postmenopause starts after menopause and lasts the rest of your life. To learn more about menopause and its impact, visit www.womenshealth.gov/menopause.

Defining Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating

EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions that affect how you eat, think about food, and feel about your body. They have severe impacts on physical and mental health and require professional diagnosis and treatment.

DISORDERED EATING

Disordered eating refers to unhealthy eating behaviors that don't meet the criteria for an eating disorder but can still harm your health. Examples include skipping meals, extreme dieting, and using food to cope with stress. With early intervention and support, disordered eating may improve.

HOW DO EATING DISORDERS AND DISORDERED EATING AFFECT HEALTH?

Both eating disorders and disordered eating can cause serious health problems that many women in midlife already have an increased risk for, including:



Weak Bones: Not getting enough nutrients can be associated with osteoporosis, making your bones fragile.



Weight Issues: Eating disorders can lead to unhealthy weight gain or loss affecting the whole body.



Sarcopenia: A lack of nutrients can lead to muscle loss and strength, affecting movement, balance, and daily activities.



A Weakened Immune System: Poor nutrition can make it harder for your body to fight off illness.



Heart Problems: You may develop heart disease or experience blood pressure that is too high or too low.

Recognizing unhealthy patterns early and seeking support can prevent these health conditions from getting worse as you age.

To learn more about eating disorders and disordered eating, visit www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/mental-health-conditions/eating-disorders

Eating Disorders in Midlife

Research is limited around eating disorders in women aged 40–60, but studies do show that women who report more menopausal symptoms also show higher rates of disordered eating. Menopause can create physical and emotional challenges that may increase risk of eating disorders and/or disordered eating including:

- Hormonal changes which can impact appetite
- Weight changes which may affect body image
- Poor sleep which can influence eating habits
- Anxiety, depression, and stress
- Social pressure around aging and appearance

Tips For Staying Healthy Through Midlife

- 1. Plan Ahead:** If you've struggled with an eating disorder before, talk to your health care provider about managing weight and mental health during menopause.
- 2. Get Help:** Work with a mental health provider and/or dietitian to work through problems with body image or eating habits.
- 3. Take Care of Yourself:** Rest, practice self-care, and spend time with loved ones.
- 4. Pay Attention to Signs:** If you notice unhealthy eating habits or negative thoughts about your body, seek help from a provider or talk to a loved one.

How to Support Someone Who May Need Help



Listen Without Judgment: Encourage open conversations about the person's feelings.



Share Helpful Resources: Suggest professional help if needed.



Be Patient and Supportive: Recovery takes time, and your support can make a big difference.

Resources to Get Support and Learn More

If you or someone you know is struggling with eating habits, help is available:

- **Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text **988** for free immediate help 24/7. You can also chat at <https://988lifeline.org>.
- **The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Helpline:** Call **800-622-HELP (4357)** or text **435748 (HELP4U)** for 24/7 help.
- **The National Alliance for Eating Disorders' Helpline:** Call **866-662-1235** for help Monday–Friday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. ET.
- **Eating Disorders | Office on Women's Health:** <https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/mental-health-conditions/eating-disorders>.
- **Body Image and Mental Health | Office on Women's Health:** <https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/body-image-and-mental-health>.
- **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA):** <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>.
- **Eating Disorders | National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH):** <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders>.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's treatment locator tool:** [FindTreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov).