

ARE YOU A FREAKY EATER?

It's not quite bulimia. And it's not anorexia. But there is a world of weird eating habits that are consuming girls like you. Now it's time to put an end to them—before they turn into full-blown eating disorders. **BY JESSICA BLATT**

A

At some point, when staring at a plate of food, you've probably thought, What's going to happen if I eat this? Maybe you've started to feel shy about eating in front of other people, or you're nervous about eating "bad" foods. Maybe before you fall asleep at night, you stress about what you'll let yourself eat the next day, or you find yourself lying about what or how much you've eaten. Maybe you can't eat foods that touch each other on your plate, or have to cut your food into tiny pieces to drag out eating it. You're not alone: Girls *everywhere* think that taking careful control of what they eat will help them feel good about themselves. It could start because you want to lose weight, or it can come on almost inexplicably—you just know that if you eat in a particular way, *everything will be okay*. But the danger is that, at some point, a switch can flip inside of you so that these patterns lead to devastating eating disorders. You can go from thinking you have control over your food—to letting food have control over *you*. And while it may be a shock to learn that weird eating habits can be a way of covering up or dealing with emotions, you need to take a look at your food habits and strip them away to reveal what's *really* bothering you. When you do, you'll be on the way to healing the *real* problem you're trying to avoid—and having a healthier relationship with food. ➡



Food foe
What used to be your favorite snack can suddenly feel like the enemy.

“My food rituals became anorexia”



Brinkley, 17, never thought the one part of her life that made her feel secure could turn her world upside down. Now healthy again, she reveals her very personal food ordeal:

In ninth grade, my life started feeling really overwhelming: I was accepted to a competitive high school and came to feel outcast and surrounded by stress. For months leading up to my 15th birthday, I'd developed weird food rituals—like cutting food into lots of pieces and eating with my



hands. It was a way to comfort myself; when I had control over my food, the stress around me didn't matter as much. The habits built up gradually: I'd decided that some foods were okay to eat and others weren't. ('Diet' foods were fine, even though they're actually *unhealthy*, but things like carrots weren't!) Before I knew it, I'd given myself so many rules about what and how I could eat—and when I could 'let' myself enjoy food. Every night, I'd have a Skinny Cow ice-cream sandwich while watching *Degrassi*, but that was the *only* time I'd turn off my worrying. The rest of the time, I either felt disgusted with myself for eating or guilty if I threw away the food on my plate. Mostly I'd skip meals. When my boyfriend at the time told me his grandma thought I was getting *too* skinny, I denied I had a problem—but it made me feel *good*.

My 15th birthday was a low point of my weird eating: I needed my mom to promise me the night before that I could have cake, but nothing else, for breakfast; otherwise, in my mind, I wouldn't be able to go shopping afterward like I'd planned. But then eating one slice wasn't enough: I kept picking at the cake, wanting more while hating myself for not stopping. Over burgers at

“I can't eat in front of people”



I can't eat in front of people I don't know—I won't eat until they go away. It began when I started high school and became more self-conscious about what people were thinking of me. I feel like they're judging me for what or how I'm eating. I'll force myself to eat if I'm *really* hungry, but my whole body tenses up. I don't want to be this way, but I can't change.

—SAMANTHA, 16, NARRAGANSETT, RI

SECRET TRIGGERS

These sneaky factors can't cause weird eating—but they can make it worse.

food labels



With so many foods marked “diet” or “low-cal,” you may think it's wrong not to eat them. But they can make you feel **obsessive** about counting fat and calories.

trauma

A major life event, like a death in the family, may make you long for the kind of **comfort** that eating rituals might seem to bring. But if you realize you're constantly comfort-eating (or not eating at all), you should **talk** to someone about the deeper issues.

friends

If your friends are food-obsessed or go through **food phases** (they're vegan one week, protein-only the next), you may want to go along too. But if everyone you hang out with focuses on food and fad diets, you can start to feel **frantic** about not dieting.

GETTING HELP

Food is so important to your health—so don't let freaky eating spiral out of control.



HOW TO SPOT IT

Ask yourself: Do you avoid scenarios where people will be eating? Do you judge whether you've had a good day based on what or how much you've eaten? Do you get panicky if you can't perform certain rituals?

HOW TO STOP IT

If you constantly worry about food, try this: Write down when your food worries started, then write what else was going on in your life at that time. What you may see is that you've been pushing down stress or sadness—and if you figure out what's really been going on, you can address it. Start by talking to a parent or your school's psychologist. If that doesn't help, try the resources below.

find an expert:

- ✓ **Get more information:** See the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) Web site, nationaleatingdisorders.org, to get support and to download the Eating Disorders Survival Guide.
- ✓ **Make the call:** Call **800-951-2237** for toll-free confidential support and guidance from NEDA's help-line volunteers.
- ✓ **Consider treatment:** Talk to your doctor and your parents about in-patient treatment. Facilities like The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt offer intensive treatment to help you get better.

IF A FRIEND NEEDS HELP, SAY:

"I care about you so much—that's why I want to talk about something. It seems like you're having a hard time dealing with food, and I really want to help you feel better. Neither of us knows the best way to deal with this, though—so let's go talk to someone. I can come with you to see your doctor or the guidance counselor or your mom. I want to be here for you in every way I can, and I'll stand by your side as you get help."

"My food can't touch"

lunch, I made my fries last forever, double-dipping each one in tons of ketchup.

When I look at my journal entry from that day, it just has a bunch of words going down the page. They're answers to a survey I found online that night, to see if my 'weird eating' had become an eating disorder. There was a score at the bottom, which told me I needed help. But I ignored it.

Finally a few weeks later, my therapist and my parents decided I needed medical attention for eating disorders. They got me into a treatment center, where I was diagnosed with anorexia and went through eight weeks of treatment. Two years later, I'm now a recovered anorexic.

When you have food rituals, your mind tells you that doing them is going to keep you from gaining weight, keep you accepted, keep you comfortable, keep you from failing. But no food behavior can do any of those things. It's just going to make you feel worse."



“My food cannot touch; if it does, I can't eat it. I'm scared to eat at unfamiliar restaurants, since I don't know exactly what's in the food. And I have to eat each item separately: I'll eat all my fries, then my burger—no mixing. I've been this way my whole life: When I was little, I had to use those plates with dividers. I know I'm missing out on fun things, like eating at parties, but I can't shake my worries.”

—BRITTANY, 18, OAKWOOD, VA

63%

of teen girls feel guilty when they've eaten "bad" foods.

SOURCE: A SEVENTEEN/SHEPPARD PRATT SURVEY, MAY 2008

"I started freaky eating to cope with depression"



“When my sister died four years ago, I got so depressed that I began extreme diets, then purging. I got medical help, but I still eat weirdly: For lunch, I have tuna and crackers (only in a plastic container); every cracker has to be snapped into four parts. I won't eat red meat, eggs, anything squishy, or drink anything but water and coffee. I'm trying to stop my habits, though—I want a normal life, and I feel like they're holding me back.”

—SARAH, 22, ASHEVILLE, NC

38%

of teen girls feel anxious or depressed from thinking about food.

SOURCE: A SEVENTEEN/SHEPPARD PRATT SURVEY, MAY 2008

Want to participate in our surveys? Go to wrisiders.com/17mag.