



# Social Media Diet in Adolescence: Effects on Mental Health and Eating Behaviour

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## • Abstract

Adolescents face constant exposure to unrealistic beauty standards and harmful eating trends through social media—a phenomenon termed the "social media diet." This content distorts body image, encourages disordered eating behaviours (orthorexia, binge eating), and lowers self-esteem. Developmentally vulnerable, teens internalize these ideals, leading to anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and harmful cycles of social validation. A multidisciplinary approach—integrating mental health support, media literacy, and nutritional guidance—is essential to mitigate these effects and promote healthier online engagement.

## • Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial period for forming healthy habits, with poor dietary choices and social media exposure linked to obesity, eating disorders, and body dissatisfaction. While social media can promote unhealthy behaviours through idealized body standards and unverified health advice, it also offers potential to encourage wellness through targeted interventions. Understanding its dual impact on dietary habits and self-perception is essential for fostering informed health choices among youth.

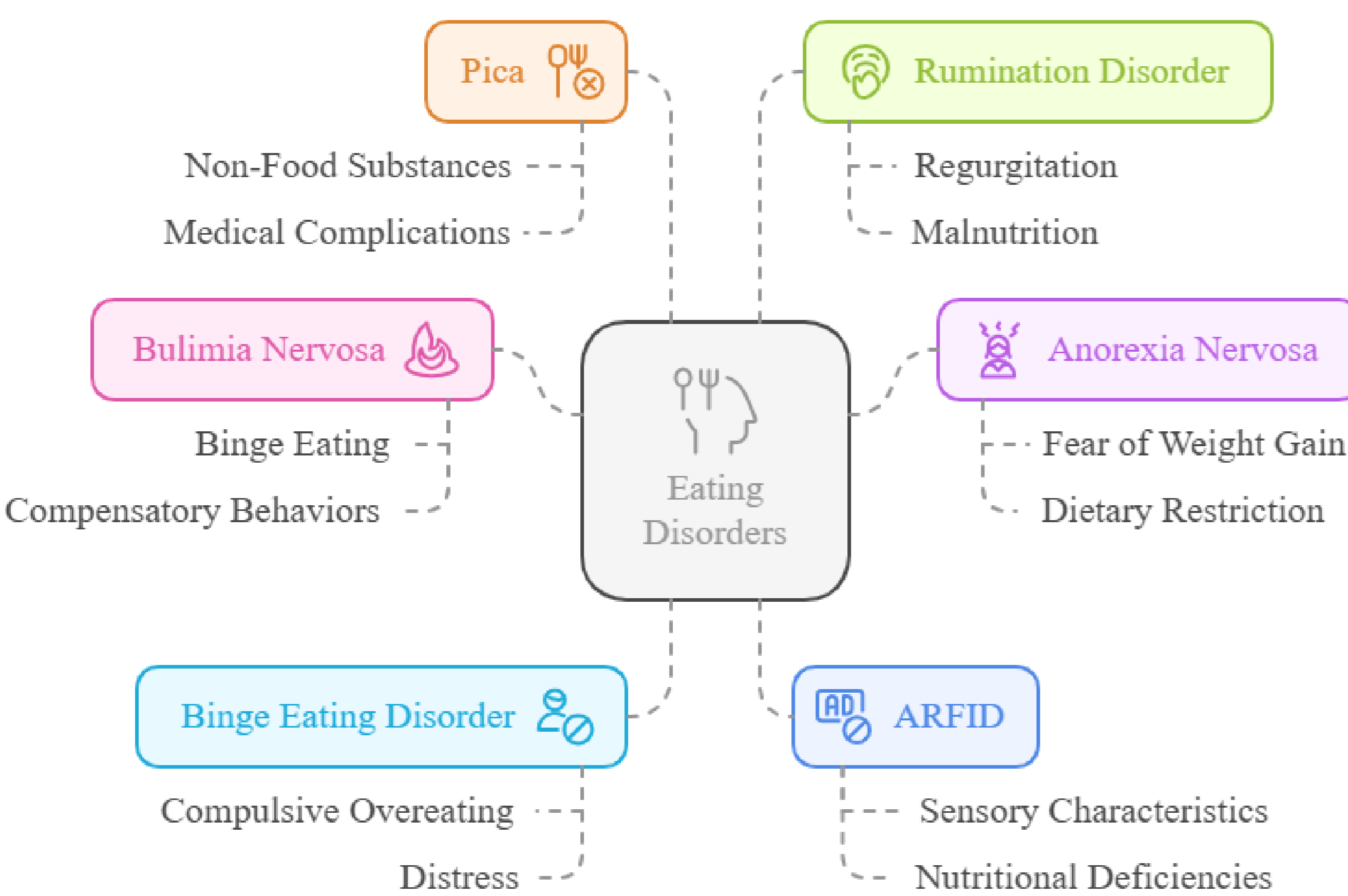


Figure 1. Eating disorders

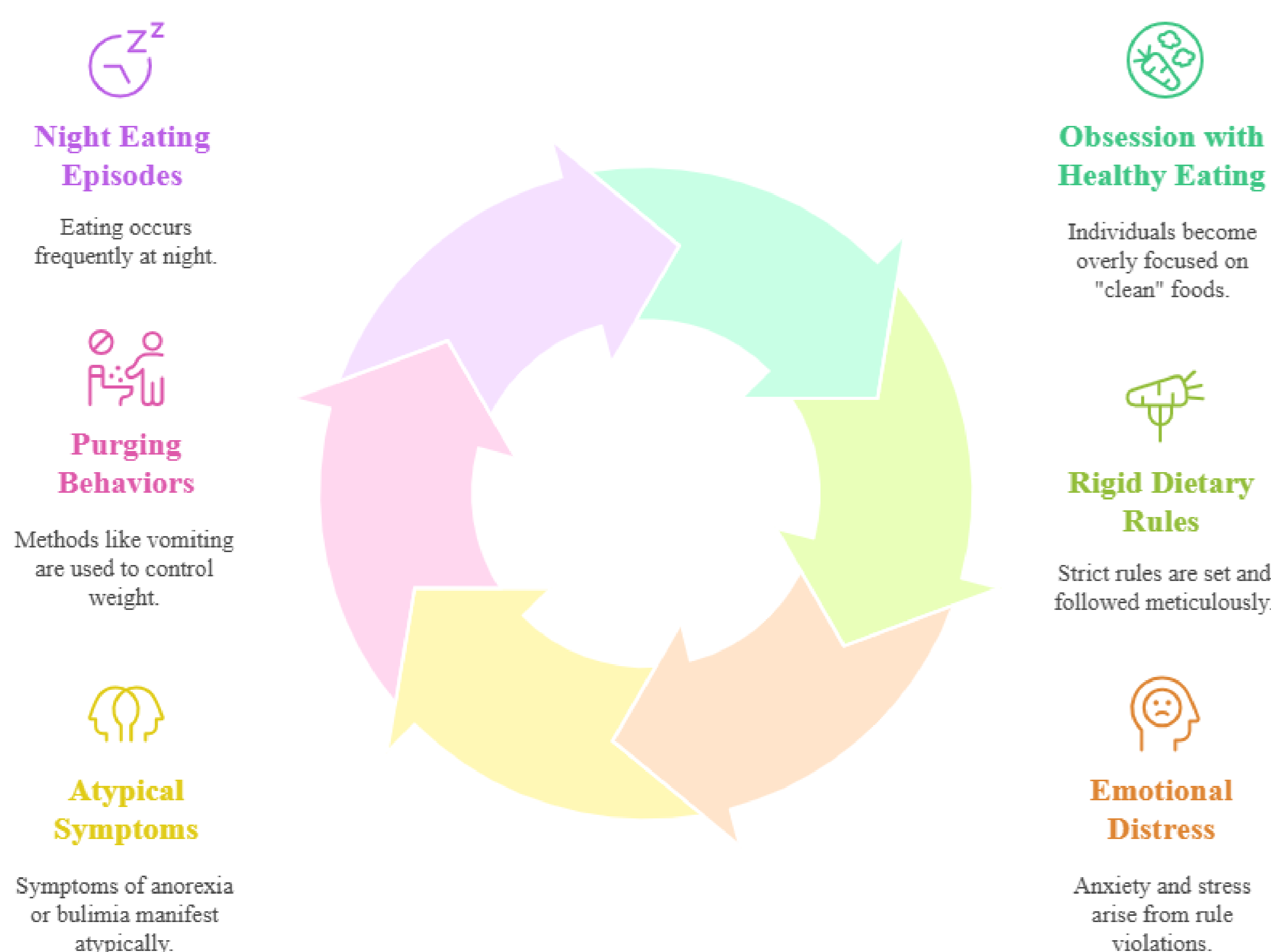


Figure 2. Cycle of subclinical eating disorders

## • Conclusions

Social media has a dual role in adolescent health—both harming mental well-being through body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, while also offering avenues for support and recovery. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to harmful content due to developmental sensitivity, with gender-specific risks reinforcing unrealistic body ideals. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, media literacy, and responsible content creation to mitigate risks and promote positive health behaviours.

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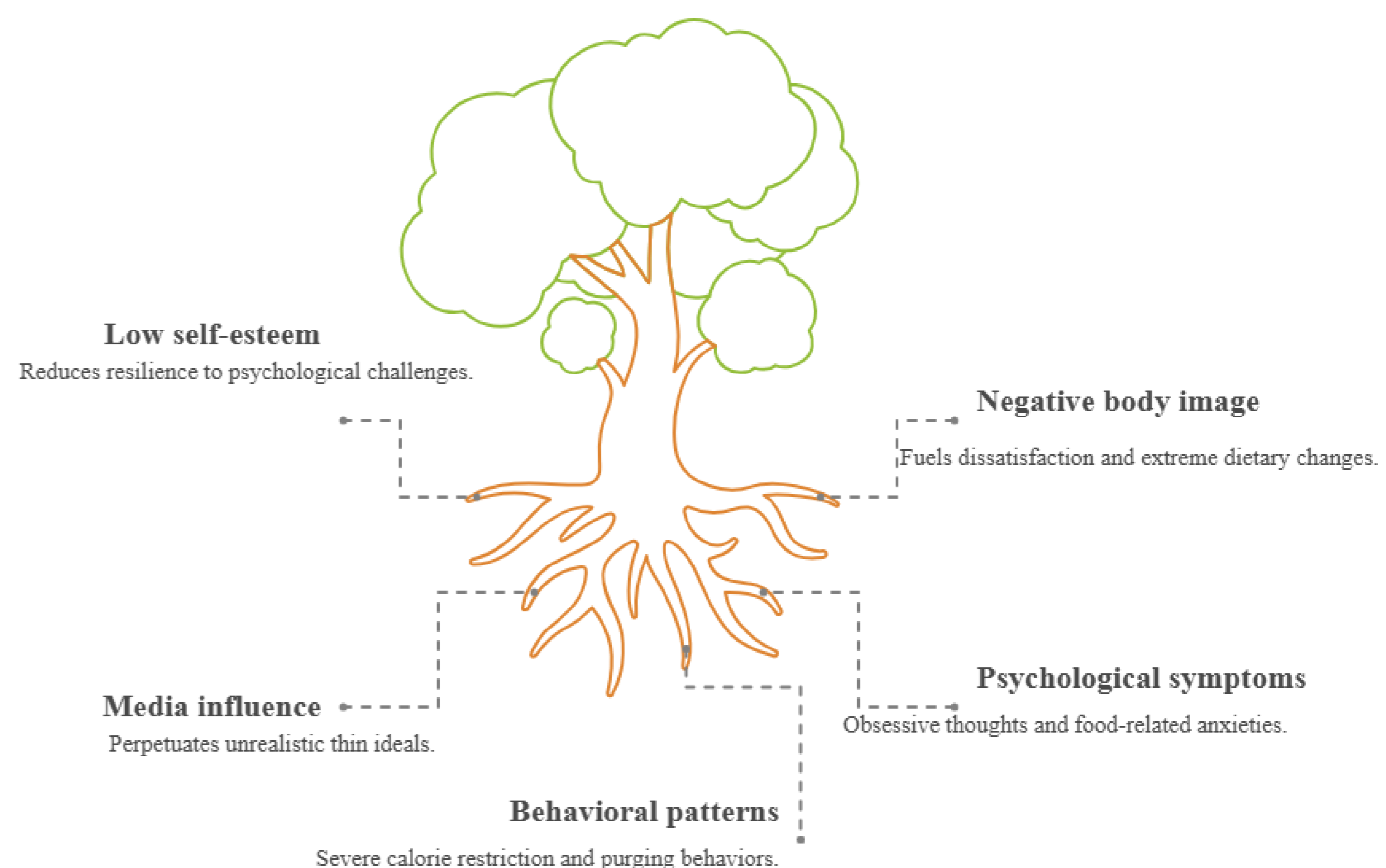


Figure 3. Increased disordered eating behaviours among adolescents

New WHO Europe data reveals 11% of adolescents show problematic social media use (up from 7% in 2018), with girls disproportionately affected (13% vs. 9% in boys). Digital engagement is pervasive: 36% maintain constant online contact with peers (peaking at 44% in 15-year-old girls). These findings underscore the urgent need to address digital overuse in youth mental health strategies.

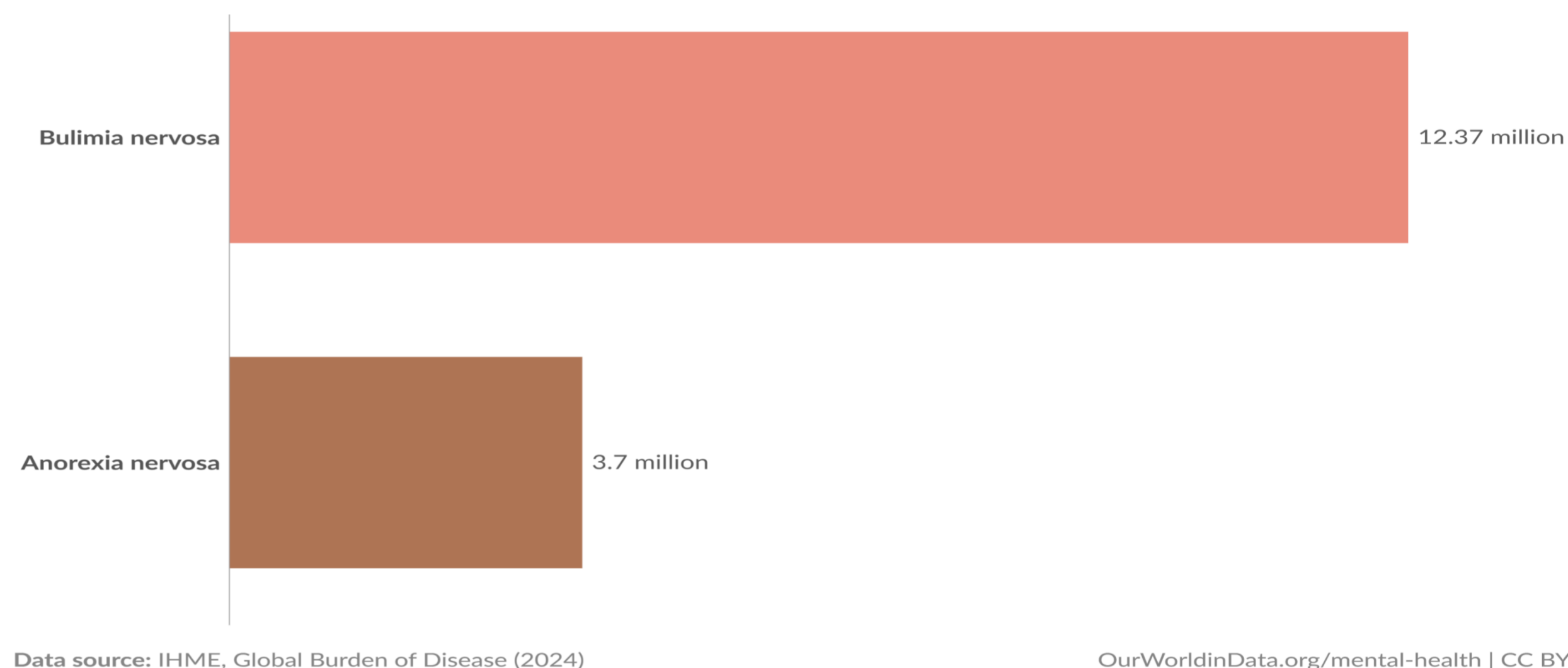


Figure 4. Anorexia or bulimia nervosa estimated cases, World, 2021