

Eating disorders - adolescents

For the purpose of this fact sheet, older children and adolescents refer to children from the age of eight years. Until recently, eating disorders have been rare in younger children. Unfortunately this is no longer the case. Both the Westmead Hospital in Sydney and the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne have observed that eating disorder cases have increased substantially in the under-12 age group.

Often, an eating disorder develops as a way for an adolescent to feel in control about what's happening in their life. While people with eating disorders focus on food, weight and shape, there are nearly always underlying issues being masked by the eating disorder.

These issues often surface when the eating disorder symptoms are reduced, and need to be dealt with independently. For example, a divorce or death in a family might trigger an eating disorder. Once the symptoms are under control, the adolescent may need counselling to help deal with issues of loss or abandonment.

Symptoms of eating disorders

Symptoms that should always be investigated further include:

- Rapid weight loss or weight gain
- Changes in weight, shape or behaviour around food
- Excessive physical activity
- Feelings of unhappiness with body shape and size
- Periods ceasing in girls (although this may not always occur).

Types of eating disorders

The main types of eating disorder include:

- **Anorexia nervosa** – characterised by restricted eating, loss of weight and a fear of putting on weight
- **Bulimia nervosa** – periods of bingeing on high-kilojoule foods (often in secret), followed by attempts to compensate by over-exercising, vomiting, or periods of strict dieting. The bingeing is accompanied by feelings of shame and being 'out of control'
- **Eating disorders not otherwise specified (EDNOS)** – which is the largest group of eating disorders and includes disorders such as binge eating disorder.

Risk factors for eating disorders

We don't know why some older children, particularly adolescents, develop an eating disorder and others don't. However, many factors might influence an adolescent to develop an unhealthy eating pattern or to become fearful about gaining weight. These factors may be social or environmental, interpersonal, biological or familial. Often, a combination of things may trigger an eating disorder in an otherwise vulnerable person.

Personality risk factors

Personality factors that make a person more at risk of developing an eating disorder may include:

- Low self-esteem
- Perfectionism
- Difficulties expressing feelings like anger or anxiety

- Being a 'people pleaser'
- Difficulties being assertive with others
- Fear of adulthood.

Social or environmental risk factors

Social or environmental risk factors in the development of an eating disorder may include:

- Being teased or bullied
- A belief that high expectations from family and others must be met
- Major life changes such as family break-up, or the accumulation of many minor stressors
- Peer pressure to behave in particular ways
- A parent or other role model who consistently diets or who is unhappy with their body
- Media and advertising images of the 'perfect' body
- A cultural tendency to judge people by their appearance.

Boys and girls

Eating disorders are more likely to affect females than males. However, about 25 per cent of cases in adolescents occur with males. Girls and boys can experience different social pressures about how they should look. Primary-school-age children are not immune to these pressures, and their attitudes and behaviours reflect adult concerns. Like many adult females, some girls want to lose weight and be thin and, like many adult males, some boys want to lose body fat, but increase muscle mass. Some boys try to meet unrealistically thin standards.

Early warning signs of eating disorders

Adolescents can become fussy about particular foods or lose weight for lots of reasons, but it is important to get any concerns checked out. Some signs that a young person might have an eating disorder are:

- Rapid weight loss
- An intense fear of gaining weight
- Denial of being hungry
- Deceptive behaviour around food – for instance, throwing out or hiding school lunches
- Avoiding food
- Compulsive exercising and a need to be active all the time
- Eating in secret
- Cutting out particular food groups, such as meat or dairy products
- Developing food rituals – such as always using the same bowl, cutting food up into tiny pieces or eating very slowly
- Behavioural changes – such as social withdrawal, irritability or depression
- Sleep disturbance.

Dieting increases the risk of developing eating disorders

Dieting is common among adolescents. Eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia nervosa can be triggered by weight loss dieting.

A person who crash diets (severely restricts calories for a period of time), substantially increases their risk of developing an eating disorder. Adolescents should not be encouraged to 'diet'.

How parents and teachers can help

Children are great imitators, so parents, teachers and other adults can play an important role to help prevent eating disorders and promote positive body image in young children.

Foster a healthy relationship with food

You can encourage older children and adolescents to develop a healthy relationship with food if you:

- Try not to label foods as 'good' or 'bad' – this sets up cravings and feelings of guilt when the 'bad' foods are eaten.

- Avoid using food as bribes or punishment.
- Accept that children are likely to have different eating habits from adults – for instance, adolescents may require more food more frequently during the day or may go through periods of liking or disliking particular foods.
- Do not crash diet and don't try to put your child on a diet.
- Allow your child to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. Don't force your child to eat everything on their plate.

Encourage older children and adolescents to feel good about their bodies

There are lots of ways to help your children feel good about their bodies, including:

- Show an acceptance of different body shapes and sizes, including your own.
- Make a positive effort to portray your own body as functional and well-designed.
- Demonstrate healthy eating and sensible exercise.
- Don't criticise or tease your children about their appearance.
- Encourage your children to 'listen' to their bodies and to become familiar with different physical feelings and experiences.
- Encourage sport and regular exercise to help maintain your child's healthy weight and foster their body confidence.

Encourage self-esteem

A strong sense of identity and self-worth is important to help older children and adolescents cope with life pressures. You can:

- Help them to develop effective coping strategies.
- Encourage them to express their needs and wants, to make decisions (and cope with the consequences) and to pursue things they are good at.
- Allow them to say 'no'. Encourage them to be assertive if they feel they have been mistreated.
- Help them develop a critical awareness of the images and messages they receive from television and magazines.

Professional help

If your older child or adolescent is preoccupied and unhappy with their body, or seems to be developing behaviours like restricting their eating, then professional advice may be helpful. See your doctor for information and referral.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- A psychologist
- The Eating Disorder Foundation Victoria Tel. (03) 9885 0318, non-metro Tel. 1300 550 236

Things to remember

- Eating disorders are about feelings, not food.
- Changes in behaviour with food, or feeling unhappy with body shape and size, could signal that a child is having emotional, social or developmental difficulties.
- Children learn by imitating, so parents, teachers and other adults can help prevent eating disorders by setting good examples.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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