

COVID-19 and Eating Disorders: Information for people with eating disorders and their carers



Given this is a new strain of Coronavirus, there is currently no specific data that people with eating disorders are at an increased risk of COVID-19.

However, given our knowledge of the physical effects of eating disorders on the body, there is reason to believe that some people experiencing eating disorders may be particularly vulnerable to more severe forms of the illness during this pandemic.

Here we have outlined why people experiencing eating disorders may be at greater risk during this time:

- Malnutrition, reduced body fat stores and impaired gut functioning affect the body's ability to mount a defence against infections, including viruses such as COVID-19.
- Reduced muscle strength may result in difficulties mounting a strong cough, which can impair the ability to clear the lungs adequately.
- Respiratory reserves may already be low for some patients, increasing the need for possible inpatient medical care and mechanical ventilation.
- Malnourished individuals have low carbohydrate stores, which places them at additional risk of hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) during periods of stress.
- People with both restricting and purging eating disorders and those undergoing re-feeding are at risk of metabolic and electrolyte imbalances, which can increase risk of respiratory failure and cardiac arrest.

Implications for the presentation of COVID-19 symptoms

It is important to note that the typical presentation of infection may not always be present in those that are malnourished. This includes:

- Absence of fever
- Absence of increased heart rate
- Lack of substantial cough

How to minimise your risk

It is recommended that patients with eating disorders as well as their carers and loved ones follow the measures advised by the Department of Health and Human Services in minimising their risk of contracting COVID-19.

No additional precautionary measures for patients with eating disorders are advised at this stage.

What to do if you think you have COVID-19 and are in need of medical treatment

- Call your GP clinic in advance as per government guidelines
- Inform the clinic of your own or your loved one's vulnerable status due to an existing eating disorder. Use the information on this page to support you if needed.
- If it is an emergency, present to your local emergency department or call 000.
- Keep your treatment team informed of your condition

Don't forget the basics!

It's important to manage cold and flu symptoms as per the recommended guidelines.

- Visit <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/colds-and-flu-treatments> for more information.
- If needing to self-isolate, ensure a trusted carer will bring the nutritional support to you or any supplies needed. Do not go without.

Staying in touch with your treatment team and continuing your treatment plan

During this period, it is essential that you remain in contact with your treating clinicians so that they can best advise you on how to maintain or pivot your treatment plan. Whilst external factors may affect the way your treatment takes place, it is important to continue to prioritise your recovery.

Alternative options for treatment for those in isolation

The federal government has announced certain MBS item numbers for the provision of telehealth for some services. This means that some clients with eating disorders will be able to consult their clinicians (such as GP, paediatrician or psychologist) via video link or telephone, rather than in person. These new telehealth item numbers are all bulk billed.

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For the reasons already outlined, many patients with eating disorders will be eligible for these telehealth consultations as they are at greater risk from the virus as they fall into the category of 'people with chronic health conditions or those who are immunocompromised'.

The full list of eligible people to access COVID-19 telehealth item numbers is available at health.gov.au

Important note about Telehealth for Psychology and Dietetic services

At this stage, the new MBS mental health telehealth options are only for those on **Mental Health Care Plans** and **do not** include those on the recently introduced **Eating Disorder Plans**.

For those who do not access MBS rebates for their psychological or dietetic services via a Mental Health Care Plan or an Eating Disorder Plan, it does not matter if your appointment is in person or via telehealth.

We encourage you to talk to your clinical team about best options for you.

Additional Supports

Special consideration for supermarket food delivery

Woolworths have created a Priority Assistance program for vulnerable members of the community. People with eating disorders and carers are encouraged to apply to access online food shopping and delivery.

<https://www.woolworths.com.au/shop/discover/priorityassistance>

To support your application, you can ask your treating clinician to sign off on this template letter designed by healthcare professionals.

Download letter template

Working from home for parents and carers

Carers are encouraged to work from home where possible.

Use this template letter for carers to assist with the request to work from home. You will need your treating practitioner to sign off on it.

Download letter template

Key contacts for individuals and families

✓ The EDV Hub

Mon - Fri 930am - 430pm
PH 9994 0354 or email edv@eatingdisorders.org.au
<https://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/find-support/edv-and-covid-19/>

✓ The Butterfly Foundation

8am - midnight (AEST), seven days a week
PH. 1800 33 4673
<https://www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au/covid-19/>

✓ Eating Disorders Families Australia

<https://www.edfa.org.au/>
EDFA are running their strive support groups online until further notice.

✓ F.E.A.S.T

Community Pandemic Support
<https://www.feast-ed.org/f-e-a-s-t-community-pandemic-support/>

COVID-19

COVID-19 Hotline

1800 675 398 (24 hours, 7 days a week)

Victoria's Department of Health and Human Services

<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>

Federal Government Coronavirus health alerts

<https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert>

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