



How to tell if your child has an eating disorder

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Compiled by Priory for IAPS



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Eating disorders cause people to develop severely disrupted eating habits. This isn't just about diet changes or trying to lose a small amount of weight – eating disorders are complex conditions that can take over someone's life.

People suffering from an eating disorder usually have an obsession about their weight and appearance. This causes them to control or restrict their food intake, leading to unhealthy dietary choices and a range of psychological and physical problems. Eating disorders are most common amongst teenage girls, but anyone of any age or gender can develop an eating disorder, including younger children.

What are the different types of eating disorder?

There are four main types of eating disorder:

- **Anorexia** causes an obsession with being thin, an irrational fear of gaining weight, and a distorted body image. People with anorexia try to keep their weight as low as possible by starving themselves and purging their body of calories.
- **Bulimia** causes people to binge (eat lots of food at once) and then make themselves sick, abuse laxatives or exercise excessively (purging). Bulimia can be harder to spot than anorexia because often, someone with bulimia stays a 'normal' weight.
- **Binge eating disorder (BED)** causes people to binge eat on a regular basis, even when they aren't hungry. People with BED don't purge, which means they can become obese.
- **Eating disorders not otherwise specified (EDNOS)** can resemble other forms of eating disorder but does not meet the requirements to receive a diagnosis.

What are the symptoms of a childhood eating disorder?

If you notice a combination of the following signs in your child, it may be that they have developed, or are starting to develop, an eating disorder.

Behavioural symptoms:

- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Unusual behaviour around food e.g. only using certain cutlery, cutting food into tiny pieces
- A sudden interest in cooking, but refusing to eat
- Wanting to eat alone or in secret
- Wearing baggy clothes
- Going to the toilet immediately after eating
- Eating large quantities of food without gaining weight
- Repeatedly weighing themselves
- Social isolation

Physical symptoms:

- Abnormally low or high weight
- Weight stagnation (adolescents typically put on weight until the age of 20)
- Exhaustion

- Feeling cold
- Stomach pains
- Dizziness
- Mouth infections
- Damaged teeth
- Scars on their knuckles or the back of their hand
- Bad breath

Psychological symptoms:

- Being obsessed with appearance
- Feeling guilty after eating
- Getting stressed at mealtimes
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Mood swings
- Insomnia
- Panic attacks
- Self-harm
- Suicidal thoughts

I think my child has an eating disorder – what are the next steps?

You may find the following steps useful if you think your child is showing signs of an eating disorder:

- **Talk to your child** - ask if they're OK and if there's anything they want to talk about. If your child doesn't want to talk to you, encourage them to talk to another person they trust. Let them know that you're there to support them.
- **Take them seriously** - it can be difficult to understand the behaviour of someone with an eating disorder. Some of their issues may seem irrational to you but could be a major source of distress for your child. That's why it's crucial to take them seriously and avoid being critical.
- **Learn about eating disorders** - not only will this will help you to understand your child's behaviour, but will mean that you are able to spot the warning signs.
- **Stop the body and food talk** - we all talk about food and weight, but this can be a sensitive subject for someone with an eating disorder. Try to steer conversations away from these subjects.
- **Seek help** - it is essential that you seek professional help if you think your child has an eating disorder. Make an appointment to see your GP; they will be able to advise on next steps.

IAPS is working in partnership with Priory to deliver a Teacher Conference on Mental Health 20th March.

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