



How to tell if a child has an eating disorder

Eating disorders cause people to develop severely disrupted eating habits. They are complex conditions that can take over someone's life. Eating disorders are most commonly experienced in teenage girls, but can affect anyone, including younger children.



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 the set of symptoms won't fall into any of the above categories, to receive a formal diagnosis.

What are the symptoms of a childhood eating disorder?

The various eating disorders cause many different behaviours, but they can commonly include compulsive or excessive exercising, refusing to eat or eating alone, going to the toilet after eating, eating excessively without gaining weight, and repeatedly weighing themselves.

Eating disorders can result in many physical symptoms, ranging from exhaustion, stomach pains, dizziness, mouth infections and damaged teeth.

Behavioural symptoms can include low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger, mood swings, insomnia, panic attacks, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

If you think a child is showing signs of an eating disorder, you may find the following steps useful:

- + **Encourage children to open up** – ask if there's anything they want to talk about. If a child doesn't want to speak 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 a child. That's why it's crucial to take them seriously and avoid being critical
- + **Learn about eating disorders** – not only will this help you to understand the child's behaviour, it will also help you to spot the warning signs of a particular eating disorder
- + **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 a child has an eating disorder. Make an appointment to see your GP – they will be able to advise on next steps



Contact us

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