

Adolescents and Eating Disorders

How to help

Nowadays, eating disorders are affecting adolescents at earlier and earlier ages. An estimated 43% of eating disorders first occur in girls and boys age 15 and younger, and the problems appear in some children younger than ten. In order to provide the necessary support, it is up to the adults in these children's lives to recognize the warning signs of eating disorders and understand the difference between ordinary adolescent behavior and a potentially life threatening condition.

Sorting it out

An eating disorder can take a restrictive form (denying the body food), a bulimic form (overeating followed by some method of purging), a compulsive form (uncontrolled, impulsive or continuous eating), or a combination of the three.

Eating disorders are difficult to diagnose in adolescents because young people's bodies grow and mature at different rates, and emotional highs and lows are the norm. For example, girls' menstrual cycles begin at different ages and can be irregular, so an absence of menstruation might simply be due to a slow rate of maturation in a normal, healthy girl.

When a child denies the importance of eating a balanced diet it may simply be because he or she does not yet understand the relationship between eating and health — nothing more than an issue of emotional immaturity. Most teens are moody and distant at times, and such behavior shouldn't necessarily be taken as a sign of a problem. But parents and caregivers who seriously suspect eating disorders must watch for potentially unhealthy weight control practices and undue attention that a young person pays to food, weight and exercise.

Cause and effect

Experts agree that eating disorders are most likely caused by a combination of factors. Most adolescents who suffer from eating disorders also suffer from some type of depression. Once an eating disorder takes hold, it can add more issues for its victims and their loved ones — including social isolation, loss of self-esteem, anxiety and family conflicts.

The physical effects of eating disorders can be catastrophic for many of the body's vital organs, and can actually halt growth and development of muscle mass and bone mineral in young bodies. Some of the damage can be irreversible if the disorder persists over an extended period of time.

The sooner an eating disorder is properly diagnosed and treated in a young person, the less damage it will inflict. Even if there hasn't been a dramatic

change in weight, if an adolescent has engaged in fasting, bingeing and/or purging, you should seek medical and psychological treatment for the adolescent immediately.

What you can do

If you suspect an adolescent might be suffering from an eating disorder, there are steps you can take to help. Remember that eating disorders are about more than just food. They are about bigger issues that seem frightening and unsolvable to a young person. So find a calm setting in which to talk, and express your concerns in a non-threatening, supportive way.

- Cite examples of instances when you felt his eating habits were cause for concern.
- Tell her that her eating patterns are scaring you and making you fear for her and her health.
- Avoid accusing him of anything, as it will put him on the defensive.
- Understand that it will take more than just changing her eating habits to cure her disorder.
- Offer to work with him to find the help that's needed.
- Remind her that you care about her and want what's best for her.

You can also contact UBH for support and/or a referral to a professional who specializes in this area.

Resources

The National Eating Disorders Association
1-800-931-2237 www.NationalEatingDisorders.org

The Anna Westin Foundation
1-952-946-1131
www.annawestinfoundation.org

Eating Disorders Resources
1-800-756-7533
www.bulimia.com

Common eating disorders

An adolescent suffering from an eating disorder experiences extreme emotions, attitudes and behaviors related to food and weight, and needs both medical and psychological support to break the cycle. If someone close to you fits any of the descriptions below, please consult a professional or call UBH for assistance.

- Anorexia Nervosa — self-starvation and excessive weight loss, accompanied by an intense fear of weight gain and a distorted self-image.
- Bulimia Nervosa — a cycle of binge eating followed by purging through vomiting, laxative use or excessive exercise.
- Binge Eating Disorder — compulsive overeating , sometimes followed by periods of sporadic fasts or repetitive dieting.

Recognize the warning signs

The warning signs below may help you to determine if an adolescent is developing an eating disorder.

- Constant obsession with weight and shape
- Loss of a noticeable amount of weight or fluctuating weight
- Weight that is more than 10% below what is considered healthy
- Low or reduced energy
- Inability to stay warm
- Irregular menstrual periods
- Overeating
- Feeling of losing control
- Vomiting, use of laxatives or water pills, herbal agents or fasting
- Excessive exercise
- An inability to enjoy life, relationships and everyday functioning

If you suspect an adolescent has an eating disorder, consult with a physician for a physical and psychological assessment.