

## What can I do to help?

You can help your child or adolescent develop a positive attitude to his or her body in the following ways:

- Be sensitive to your child's feelings and encourage your child to talk to you. Though your child may not wish to talk about eating habits, it can still help to talk about other things.
- Explain that attractive and happy people come in different shapes and sizes.
- Talk about how the media unrealistically portrays men and women. For example, many pictures are artificially touched up to improve appearance.
- Reassure your child about body changes at puberty.
- Help your child to understand the signals the body gives about hunger, thirst, feeling full etc.
- Allow your child to eat when hungry and stop when full. Don't make your child eat everything served up at meals.
- Encourage your child to do regular sport and/or exercise to keep healthy and develop confidence in his or her body.
- Set an appropriate example by eating well and exercising sensibly yourself.
- Avoid using food as bribes, punishment or rewards.

## Eating disorders include:

**Anorexia Nervosa** where the adolescent has a fear of becoming fat and uses inappropriate ways to keeping thin. The child has an unrealistic view of his or her body.

**Bulimia Nervosa** where the adolescent is preoccupied with his or her weight. The adolescent has bouts of binge eating and then compensates for this by vomiting, dieting or using fluid tablets.

**Binge eating** in which loss of self control causes the adolescent to over-eat. This may be to seek comfort or to cope with feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt and anger.

## Who can I contact?

If you are concerned about your adolescent, it may be useful to contact:

- your general practitioner
- a paediatrician
- a psychologist
- your local community health centre.

If you feel that your adolescent's situation is urgent and you live in the Western Metropolitan Region, you may consider contacting:

- **The Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service**  
Intake Service on **1800 44 55 11**  
between 9.00am - 5.00pm,  
Monday to Friday.



# eating disorders

## Eating disorders

Although some parents may have concerns about their children's eating habits, it is not common for young children to develop serious eating disorders. However, whilst children are young it is important for them to develop a positive approach to food and body image. This may help to prevent serious problems with eating disorders in their adolescent years.

Though the focus of an eating disorder is often on food, an eating disorder may be a sign that the adolescent has emotional or social difficulties.

### What can contribute to an eating disorder?

The causes of eating disorders are not known, but the following have commonly been found in adolescents with these disorders:

- **Personality traits**
  - o low self esteem
  - o difficulties in expressing feelings such as anger and anxiety
  - o difficulties in being assertive with others
  - o being a perfectionist.
- **Social factors**
  - o a strong desire to please family, including cultural expectations
  - o media and advertising creating images of "the perfect body"
  - o major life crisis or changes.

### How do I know what to look for?

Parents frequently ask how they can know if their adolescent has an eating disorder.

The following warning signs can act as a guide:

- an obsessive fear of putting on weight
- denial of being hungry despite having eaten small amounts
- a belief they are fat no matter how thin they are
- avoidance of eating with the family or going to the bathroom straight after meals
- eating large amounts of food without gaining weight
- preoccupation with food and dieting
- exercising excessively, eating compulsively, hiding food or eating in secret
- misuse of laxatives, diuretics, appetite suppressants
- wearing loose clothes that hide the body
- behaviour change, i.e. withdrawal, irritability or depression
- girls who have begun to menstruate may miss or stop having periods.

If eating disorders continue for a long time, adolescent's health and growth may be seriously affected. Early and effective treatment for eating disorders may prevent serious problems later in life.



### Do eating disorders effect both girls and boys?

It is more likely for girls to be affected by eating disorders. However, one in five adolescents with eating disorders are boys.

### How can I look after myself?

Caring for an adolescent with an eating disorder can often lead to feelings that can be overwhelming, such as anger, guilt or sadness. These may be normal responses to the stress that you are experiencing. It is important that you have enough support from family and friends to help. It may also be helpful to find out about any support groups that you could contact.

By looking after yourself, you will be better able to look after the special needs of your adolescent.

Dealing with an adolescent who has an eating disorder can often have an effect on other parts of your life. For example, it can put a strain on your relationships with other family members. Counselling may be helpful in working through some of these issues. Sorting out these problems will also help your child.