

What Are Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders are real, complex, and devastating conditions that can have serious consequences for health, productivity, and relationships. They are not a fad, phase or lifestyle choice. They are potentially life-threatening conditions affecting every aspect of the person's functioning, including school performance, brain development, emotional, social, and physical well-being.

Eating disorders can be diagnosed based on weight changes, but also based on behaviors, attitudes and mindset. Be alert for any of these signs in your child.

Eating disorders affect both males and females of all ages.

Key things to look for around food:

- Eating a lot of food that seems out of control (large amounts of food may disappear, you find a lot of empty wrappers and containers hidden)
- Develops food rules—may eat only a particular food or food group, cuts food into very small pieces, or spreads food out on the plate
- Talks a lot about, or focuses often, on weight, food, calories, fat grams, and dieting
- Often says that they are not hungry
- Skips meals or takes small portions of food at regular meals
- Cooks meals or treats for others but won't eat them
- Avoids mealtimes or situations involving food
- Goes to the bathroom after meals often
- Uses a lot of mouthwash, mints, and/or gum
- Starts cutting out foods that he or she used to enjoy

Key things to look for around activity:

- Exercises all the time, more than what is healthy or recommended – despite weather, fatigue, illness, or injury
- Stops doing their regular activities, spends more time alone (can be spending more time exercising)

Physical Risk Factors:

- Feels cold all the time or complains of being tired all the time. Likely to become more irritable and/or nervous.
- Any vomiting after eating (or see signs in the bathroom of vomiting – smell, clogged shower drain)
- Any use of laxatives or diuretics (or you find empty packages)

Other Risk Factors:

- Believes that they are too big or too fat (regardless of reality)
- Asks often to be reassured about how they look
- Stops hanging out with their friends
- Not able to talk about how they are feeling
- Reports others are newly judgmental or “not connecting”

If Your Child Shows Signs of a Possible Eating Disorder

Seek assistance from a medical professional as soon as possible; because they are so complex, **eating disorders should be assessed by someone who specializes in the treatment of eating disorders.** The earlier a person with an eating disorder seeks treatment, the greater the likelihood of physical and emotional recovery.

More information is available from the Virginia Department of Education — www.doe.virginia.gov/support/health_medical/index.shtml — in the section titled Eating Disorders.

Weight is NOT the only indicator of an eating disorder, as people of all sizes may be suffering.

How to Communicate With Your Child

- Understand that eating disorder sufferers often deny that there is a problem.
- Educate yourself on eating disorders.
- Ask what you can do to help.
- Listen openly and reflectively.
- Be patient and nonjudgmental.
- Talk with your child in a kind way when you are calm and not angry, frustrated, or upset.
- Let him/her know you only want the best for him/her.
- Remind your child that he/she has people who care and support him/her.
- Be flexible and open with your support.
- Be honest.
- Show care, concern, and understanding.
- Ask how he/she is feeling.
- Try to be a good role model — don't engage in 'fat talk' about yourself.
- Understand that your child is not looking for attention or pity.
- Seek professional help on behalf of your child if you have ANY concerns.