

Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating Behaviors



What are disordered eating behaviors?

Many children, teens, and adults struggle with body image. Children and teens may try to change their eating habits or exercise more to be more “healthy.” However, some of these children and teenagers may diet too much or exercise too intensely. Kids may try to eat less at each meal, skip meals, cut out food groups, exercise more than a typical child would, vomit on purpose, or do other things. Some will want to look thinner, and others may want to look more muscular. They may have strong thoughts that eating is bad or scary, think they are eating too much when they are not, or think that they are overweight. Some people with eating disorders may not have negative thoughts about body image but will still significantly limit what they eat.

The National Eating Disorders Association cites that up to 22% of kids and teens worldwide will have disordered eating, and 9% of Americans will have an eating disorder in their lifetime.¹ This can affect children and teenagers of all different sizes, gender identities, and ethnicities.

When kids have lost a lot of weight, regardless of their current size, they can be more tired, sad, anxious, irritable, cold, or have trouble thinking. Losing a lot of weight can also negatively affect their heart and other organs.

¹ National Eating Disorders Association



What does treatment look like?

- If you have concerns about your child’s nutrition or weight, talk to your pediatrician. Significant weight loss can lead to serious medical and mental health complications. Children and teens with these types of concerns will need to be seen regularly by their pediatricians.
- Other providers may be involved as well, like a therapist, nutritionist, and/or psychiatrist in addition to their pediatrician.
- Treatment intensity varies and can include individual weekly appointments or therapies, an intensive outpatient program (3–4 days a week for a few hours per day), a partial hospitalization program (5–7 days a week for 6–8 hours per day), staying in a hospital temporarily, or longer-term residential care in a treatment facility.
- Treatment will involve the family, not just the child or teenager alone.

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What can I do?

FOR PARENTS:

- ✓ Disordered eating can be stressful for parents and kids! **Stay calm.** Recognize that your child is working hard and **validate the effort** a child puts in to eat.
- ✓ Be consistent that **regular meals** are necessary.
- ✓ **Family meals** are a great way to normalize eating and help everyone eat appropriate portions. However, avoid talking about whether foods are "healthy or unhealthy" or how much people are eating.
- ✓ **Talk about pride and success in other areas of their life**, like school, activities, or friends.
- ✓ **Don't talk about weight** or being too big or too small. Instead, focus on eating a variety of foods regularly because it is good for a person's body.
- ✓ **Remove the scale** from your house if your child is focused on weighing themselves frequently.
- ✓ **Monitor** the amount of exercise your child is doing.
- ✓ Eating disorders try to take control. As you work to take control away from the eating disorder, **give the child control in areas that are safe and not connected to eating.**

FOR TEENS:

- ✓ Know that while eating is something everyone does, it can also be hard. You are not alone. Find an adult you can talk to about what you are going through to help support you.
- ✓ If you are having negative thoughts about yourself while eating, try to think of these thoughts as separate from yourself so you can **"talk back"** to the negative thoughts. What would you tell a friend if they were having those thoughts? Can you tell those things to yourself?
- ✓ Use **relaxation strategies**, like deep breathing, to help if you feel stressed around eating.



How do I get help?

If you need more help, talk to your primary care provider or get support from a mental health provider. To find a mental health provider, call the phone number on the back of your child's insurance card and ask for a list of covered mental health providers in your area. You can also search for providers on your insurance company's website. For support finding resources for housing, food, and more, visit the [Children's National Hospital Community Resources website](#).

- ✓ Scan here for more information about how to find a mental health provider and how to get help in a crisis.



Pediatric **Health** Network

