



Eating Disorders in Young People

A practical psychoeducation guide for parents, carers and educators

Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions

Eating disorders affect eating behaviours, thoughts, emotions and physical health. They can occur in young people of any gender, body size or background. A person does not need to appear underweight to be medically unwell.

Early recognition matters

Eating disorders can escalate rapidly during adolescence. Early assessment and coordinated support can improve safety and recovery outcomes.

More than food or weight

Distress may involve anxiety, shame, perfectionism, body image, trauma, identity, sensory sensitivities or a need for control. The factors differ between individuals, so treatment requires an individualised formulation.

Important distinction

Eating disorders are not a choice, a phase or simply a matter of willpower. Avoid judging severity based on appearance or weight alone.

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Recognising Warning Signs

Changes can be subtle and may occur across several areas

Behavioural signs

- Skiping or restricting meals
- Rigid food rules or rituals
- Avoidance of eating with others
- Compensatory exercise or purging
- Secretive or distressed eating

Emotional & social signs

- Fear or guilt around food
- Preoccupation with shape or weight
- Body checking or reassurance seeking
- Withdrawal, irritability or low mood
- Increasing perfectionism or anxiety

Physical warning signs

Dizziness or fainting, fatigue, feeling cold, menstrual changes, gastrointestinal symptoms, dehydration or rapid changes in growth/weight may signal medical risk. Some young people experience significant complications without visible weight loss.

What should adults notice?

Look for a persistent pattern rather than one behaviour in isolation. Consider changes in functioning, emotional wellbeing, peer relationships, eating patterns and physical symptoms.

Do not wait for visible deterioration

If you are concerned, arrange a GP assessment promptly. A health professional can evaluate medical stability and determine the appropriate level of care.



How to Respond Helpfully

Support connection, reduce shame and seek assessment

1 Start a calm conversation

Choose a private moment. Describe what you have noticed without accusation: "I have noticed meals seem stressful lately, and I am concerned about you."

2 Listen and validate

Acknowledge the young person's distress. Avoid debates about appearance, calories, weight or whether they "look healthy".

3 Involve a multidisciplinary team

Seek GP medical assessment and, where appropriate, a psychologist and accredited practising dietitian experienced in eating disorders.

4 Support recovery at home and school

Maintain predictable routines, protect mealtimes from criticism, reduce weight-focused talk and coordinate reasonable school adjustments with the care team.

What to avoid

Do not shame, threaten, bargain over food, praise weight loss or assume the behaviour is attention-seeking. Do not rely on self-help strategies instead of medical review.

Recovery is possible, but progress is rarely linear.



Treatment, Safety & Support

Evidence-informed care tailored to the young person

What can treatment involve?

Treatment usually includes medical monitoring, nutritional rehabilitation and psychological support. Family-Based Treatment (FBT) is an established option for many adolescents; CBT-E and other therapies may be suitable depending on age, presentation and circumstances. Co-occurring anxiety, trauma or neurodevelopmental needs may also require attention.

A personalised, compassionate approach

Treatment should address both eating-disorder behaviours and the wider psychological, interpersonal and environmental factors maintaining distress.

When to seek urgent help

Fainting, chest pain, marked weakness, dehydration, confusion, severe restriction or purging, or suicidal thoughts warrant urgent assessment. For immediate danger, call 000 or go to an emergency department.

Australian support pathways

GP: first point of contact for medical assessment and referral.

Butterfly Foundation: 1800 33 4673 | butterfly.org.au

Lifeline: 13 11 14 | lifeline.org.au

Emergency: 000

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Information only; not a substitute for individual medical advice.