

what you

NEED TO KNOW

about...

Helping Children and Youth with Eating Disorders Information for Parents and Caregivers

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are serious problems with eating, which affect every part of a person's life, including thoughts, feelings, body and relationships. Eating disorders are very serious, and potentially fatal.

It may start off with a diet, where children or youth try something to feel better about themselves. From there, however, it can sometimes escalate into a dangerous, life threatening eating disorder.

On the **outside**, you may notice signs in your child or teen like:

- Not eating
- Binge-eating
- Vomiting (throwing up)
- Being obsessed with how her body looks



On the **inside**, your child or teen may be overwhelmed by feeling:

It is very hard for children and youth to stop eating disorder behaviours, once they become a habit. The disorder robs youth of their judgment and they become obsessed with food. Not eating enough (or starving) can lead to mood problems like:

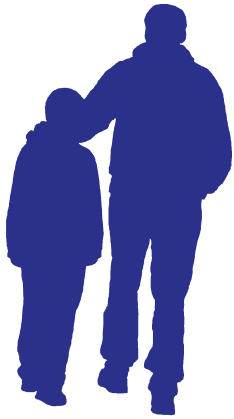
- Deep sadness
- Irritability
- Anger

Even with these terrible feelings, youth feel they must keep on with eating disorder behaviours. They hope that eventually, they will feel better on the inside.

What causes Eating Disorders?

While up to 9 out of 10 of teenage girls and many teenage boys will try to diet, only a few will go on to develop an eating disorder. Most of the time, a few things come together to lead to an eating disorder. Possible causes include:

- Being frightened by body changes during puberty
- Social pressure to look and act a certain way
- Family history of an eating disorder
- Personality traits like as perfectionism and low self-esteem
- Cultural influences on the 'ideal' of a thin body



At one time, families were blamed for causing eating disorders. Families don't cause eating disorders. All families have ups and downs. And while family problems can be stressful for children, youth and parents, it is unlikely that one situation caused the eating disorder.

In fact, families are an important part of the solution. Families play a major role in supporting and helping children and youth to recover from an eating disorder.

Main types of Eating Disorders

1

Anorexia Nervosa:

- Affects about 1 out of every 100 teenage girls (but children and boys can have it too)
- Happens when youth cut down on eating so much that they lose a lot of weight (or for children when they stop growing)
- Often involves excessive exercise
- May cause youth to:
 - Become more focused or obsessed with school work
 - Be more irritable
 - Isolate themselves from friends and family.
 - Can sometimes evolve to bulimia nervosa over time. But since this pattern takes years to develop, it is more often seen in adults.

2

Bulimia nervosa:

- Involves cycles of binge-eating and purging. A cycle usually starts when youth go on a diet and cut their food intake. Their bodies respond by driving them to eat a lot of food in one single sitting (binge eating). This often leaves youth feeling very ashamed and anxious. They feel the need to 'purge' (make up for eating so much) by:
 - Vomiting
 - Exercising
 - Skipping meals
 - Using laxatives or diuretic pills (medicines to cause more bowel movements or pass more urine)
- Affects up to 4 out of every 100 teenage girls (but can also affect teenage boys)
- May cause youth to become very irritable and distant
- May not cause any real weight loss
- Usually develops later than anorexia nervosa

3

Binge Eating Disorder (BED)

- Refers to binge eating, without 'purging' afterwards (for example by vomiting or skipping meals)
- Binges are often triggered by difficult feelings that the child or teen is unable to handle
- During a binge, people describe feeling 'out of control'
- People with BED are often overweight or obese.

4

Eating Disorder NOS (Not Otherwise Specified)

This term is used when someone has serious problems with eating, but doesn't fit the pattern for other eating disorders. Children and youth often get this diagnosis.

How do I know if my child or teen has an eating disorder?

Children and teens developing eating disorders may:

- Lose weight
- Be afraid of gaining weight
- Go on a diet
- Be more picky about eating, and eat only “healthy foods”
- Hide food in napkins, or cut food into tiny pieces
- Always go to the bathroom right after eating
- Visit ‘pro’ anorexia or eating disorder websites
- You may also notice large amounts of food missing.

The eating disorder may be more serious if your child or teen:

- Loses a lot of weight
- Fasts and skips meals on a regular basis
- Refuses to eat with family and friends
- Skips 2 menstrual periods (in girls)
- Binge eats
- Purges (for example, vomits)
- Uses diet pills or laxatives
- Exercises because he feels he has to and not because he wants to
- Refuses to eat non diet foods
- Won’t let others to prepare food
- Is extreme about counting calories
- Weighs and measures food amounts
- Is not growing taller (at a time when she should be growing)



What problems can Eating Disorders cause?

Eating Disorders can cause problems like:	Eating Disorders can cause psychological problems like:
Cold intolerance (the person feels cold all of the time)	Poor memory and concentration
Hair loss	Irritability or severe mood swings
Loss of periods in girls	Perfectionism (like spending excessive time on school work)
Osteoporosis (extreme thinning of the bones), broken bones	Anxiety
Low blood pressure	Sadness and depression
Slow heart rate	Difficulty sleeping
Smaller heart size (which can lead to heart failure or death)	Crying spells
Heart arrhythmias (irregular heart beat)	Loss of interest in regular activities
Stomach ulcers	
Stunted growth	
Dehydration (not enough body fluids)	
Breakdown of tooth enamel	

Will my child just grow out of this?

Eating disorders rarely go away without treatment. Once a diagnosis is made, your child or teen will need you and a team of professionals to overcome this illness. This is long and hard work.

What has happened to my child's personality?

How did my child go from being so sensitive to being dishonest, angry and secretive? You may have noticed many changes in your child's personality. These are the effects of starvation and the eating disorder itself. But under these behaviours, your child is probably very upset about how he is acting and he's not able to help himself.



What should we do if we think our child or teen has an eating disorder?

Start by taking your child or teen to a doctor (like your family doctor or pediatrician). Your doctor may suggest more specialized mental health services. She can also help to link with psychologists or psychiatrists.

Learn as much as you can about eating disorders. These are challenging illnesses that can cause a lot of stress at home. Children and youth can't help the way they are acting, and they can't recover from eating disorders on their own. They need the support of their families as well as mental health professionals.

Treatments for eating disorders

Eating disorders are complicated. It often takes a team of professionals working together to treat an eating disorder. Team members may include:

- Physicians (family doctors, pediatricians or psychiatrists)
- Therapists (psychologists, social workers and nurses)
- Dieticians
- You: Family members are an essential part of the team. Children and youth need family support to recover from eating disorders, just as they would if they were struggling with diabetes or cancer.

Typical Treatments:



Individual counselling (therapy) helps children and youth learn more about eating disorders, and think about some of the difficult feelings that lie underneath. They will work on improving their self-esteem and developing new coping strategies. Therapy or counselling also helps a child or teen to become motivated over time to recover from an eating disorder.



Family therapy focuses on education about eating disorders, and helps parents learn ways to support their child's recovery. Once the eating disorder behaviours have improved, family work may also focus on reducing any other stress in the family, and on teen issues in general.



Medications can be used to help reduce binge-eating and purging in bulimia nervosa. There are no medications proven to treat anorexia nervosa. Medications can be used to treat overwhelming anxiety and depression, or when a patient is very stuck and not getting better with other supports.



Hospitalization (or inpatient therapy) may be needed if a child or teen is medically unwell, and needs intensive care and monitoring. Staying in hospital can also help when a child or teen is not getting better at home even with support from family and professionals.

Helping your child or teen with an eating disorder

- ✓ **Get help and support right away**, even if your child is refusing any help or support.
- ✓ **Show you care.** Let your child know that you are concerned, and you are going to get them help.
- ✓ **Listen.** Tell your child that you want to hear what he has to say, and want to know how he is feeling inside.
- ✓ **Try to understand your child's feelings.** Your child is feeling awful about herself and is overwhelmed by self-criticism. Adding extra blame, criticism or guilt only adds to your child's stress, and can make the eating disorder stronger.
- ✓ **Deal with your own issues.** If you want to help your child, make sure you deal with your own eating disorder or body image issues. Speak to your family physician or see a mental health professional. It's a lot harder to help someone else if you're struggling yourself.



What doesn't help

- ✗ **Wasting your energy**
 - Don't waste energy blaming your child. Once an eating disorder takes over, your child is no longer in control of what he's doing. Underneath, your child is just as upset about this as you are.
 - Don't waste energy blaming yourself. Eating disorders happen to the loveliest of children, in the most wonderful of families. If there is a problem that you feel might be affecting your child's mental health, then work on this issue, or discuss it in treatment.
 - Don't spend endless time trying to figure out "why this happened". There does not have to be an underlying problem or secret at the root. Instead, devote your energy to getting your child help and being a support.
- ✗ **Not having all the facts**
 - Some people think an eating disorder is a form of slow suicide. Quite the opposite. An eating disorder is your child's way of trying to feel better.
 - Your child's refusal to eat is not "bad behaviour". Your child is stuck in a pattern of doing what she thinks will make things better. And remember, starvation dramatically alters a person's mood and behaviour.
- ✗ **Comments about weight and appearance**
 - Don't make comments or talk about weight or appearance in front of your child. Even giving compliments can be a problem because they emphasize the importance of appearance and weight. And we need to make appearance and weight less important for children and youth with eating disorders.

Where to find help in Eastern Ontario

- In a crisis? Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775
- Looking for mental health help? www.eMentalHealth.ca is a bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.



Where to Find Help in Ottawa and Eastern Ontario

- Up to age 18**
Eating Disorders Program at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario.
Web: www.cheo.on.ca Tel: CHEO Mental Health at 613-737-7600 ext. 2496
Families are free to call to ask more questions about services, however to actually receive services, a referral from your child's doctor is required.
- Age 18 and above**
Eating Disorders Clinic at the Ottawa Hospital
Web: www.ottawahospital.on.ca Tel: 613-737-7777
www.ottawa-psychologists.org/find.htm
- To Find a Psychologist in Ottawa**
Call the Ottawa Academy of Psychology referral service: 613-235-2529
Listing of many, but not all, Ottawa Psychologists, www.ottawa-psychologists.org/find.htm
- To Find a Psychologist anywhere in Ontario**
College of Psychologists of Ontario,
1-800-489-8388 www.cpo.on.ca

Support and Advocacy Groups

- Hopewell Eating Disorders Support Centre** is a charitable organization. It provides support and information to those with eating disorders and their families. Hopewell also offers an online resource directory of local Ottawa resources. Web: www.hopewell.ca, Tel: 613-241-3428



Want more information?

Websites

- National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC), is a Canadian, non-profit organization with information on eating disorders and weight preoccupation www.nedic.ca
- Children's Mental Health Ontario has an excellent section of reviewed links to useful websites with child and youth mental health information. <http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca>
- The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/eating-disorders/summary.shtml>
- Information from the Eating Disorder Specialists of Illinois. www.empoweredparents.com
- The Maudsley approach is an evidence-based treatment for eating disorders. Using this approach, parents play a key role in helping their child work towards recovery. www.maudsleyparents.org.

Books

- Herzog, D., Franko, D. & Cable, P. (2008). *Unlocking the Mysteries of Eating Disorders, A Life-Saving Guide to Your Child's Treatment and Recovery*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Leichner, P., Hall, D., Calderon, R. & Caufield, S. (2003). *An Introduction to Effective Meal Support: A Guide for Family & Friends [DVD]*. Vancouver, BC: BC Children's Hospital. Available from <http://edreg.cw.bc.ca/BookStore/public/bookstore/>
- Lock, J. & Le Grange, D. (2005). *Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder*. New York: Guildford Press.
- Katzman, D. & Pinhas L. (2005). *Help for Eating Disorders: A Parent's Guide to Symptoms, Causes and Treatments*. Toronto, ON: The Hospital for Sick Children.

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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Provided by:

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