

How do I know if my child has an eating disorder and how can I talk to them about it?

Key points:

- Eating disorders and body image issues can affect anyone.
- Seeking help early significantly reduces the severity, duration and impact of disordered eating.
- If you notice any warning signs or symptoms, whether in yourself or someone you care for, you should seek professional help straight away.
- Parents and carers play a critical role in supporting children to build positive attitudes to their bodies, to eating and to exercise.

An eating disorder is a serious mental health condition that involves an unhealthy preoccupation with eating, exercise or body shape. The earlier an eating disorder is detected, the better the chance for recovery. It is important to be aware of some of the warning signs of an eating disorder, so you can take early action if needed. There are also some things you can do to reduce the risk of your child developing an eating disorder (see also: [‘Is my child a healthy weight?’](#) and [‘How do I know if my child is eating too much or not enough?’](#)).



The development of an eating disorder is usually due to a combination of factors.

It's unlikely that one single thing will lead to an eating disorder. It's much more likely to be a combination of risk factors, including genetics, emotional factors and cultural influences. Some factors that may increase the risk of developing a body image issue or eating disorder are discrimination, trauma, and exposure to violence and abuse. In addition, pressure to conform to social or cultural stereotypes can also play a part.

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Eating disorders don't discriminate.

Eating disorders and body image issues affect people of all sizes, shapes, ages, abilities, gender identity, sexuality, cultural or linguistic background, economic status, profession or location. Anyone can experience an eating disorder.

Signs of eating disorders.

Behaviours and attitudes that may lead to an eating disorder include weight loss, dieting and control of food. The signs of an eating disorder vary widely and the list below is intended as a guide to the types of behaviours that may indicate a problem. Someone struggling with an eating disorder usually won't have all of these signs and symptoms.

- Preoccupation with weight, appearance, food or dieting, including calories, carbohydrates, fat
- Refusal to eat certain foods, progressing to restrictions of whole categories of food (e.g., no carbohydrates)
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- New practices with food or fad diets, such as vegetarianism/veganism, 'clean' eating, no carbs.
- Food rituals (compulsory behaviours around food and eating, or any situation involving food)
- Skipping meals or regularly having small portions of food
- Discomfort around eating with others
- Withdrawal from usual friends and activities
- Negative emotions related to food or eating, such as anxiety, distress, negativity or guilt
- Secrecy around eating habits
- Extreme dissatisfaction with body size and shape, including frequently body checking
- Extreme mood swings and irritability
- Noticeable fluctuations in weight, both up and down
- Excessive exercise

There are sometimes physical signs of an eating disorder, such as:

- Weight changes – rapid weight loss or weight fluctuations (up or down)
- Disturbed menstrual cycle – missing periods
(note: having a period while on hormonal contraceptives is not considered a "true" period)
- Stomach cramps – other non-specific gastrointestinal complaints (bloating, constipation)
- Difficulty concentrating – or think rationally

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- Abnormal laboratory findings (discuss this with your GP)
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Feeling cold

Parents and carers play an important role in children’s attitudes to their bodies, to eating and to exercise.

Children begin to form opinions of their own bodies from a very young age. Body dissatisfaction and weight concerns have been shown in children as young as 5 years and some research suggests this may be even younger. It’s difficult to escape the “ideal” body and diet culture that is promoted in the media (on TV, in magazines, on the internet and through social media). No matter how much you try to shield your children from it, the message is likely to come through.



However, parents and carers play a critical role in supporting our children to build positive attitudes to their bodies, to eating and to exercise. Our own beliefs, habits and words regarding food, exercise and body image have a potential impact on our children. The recommendations below may be challenging at first but continuing to work at them will help your child build healthy habits and attitudes.

Do	Avoid
<p>Set and maintain boundaries. Insist on family meals and regular meals and snacks for the whole family. Family or household rules are often disrupted by disordered eating and may need to be re-established. Be confident and set clear expectations. Structure and predictability lowers anxiety and minimises meal time negotiations.</p>	<p>Avoid weight-based language. If your child hears you criticising yours or others’ bodies they are more likely to see their own bodies in a negative way. Ultimately, we want our body to function in a way that allows us to do what we want to do each day. Explain to your child that weight gain and changes to body shape are a natural part of the growing process. Keep your language about bodies positive and focus on how we can help our body to stay healthy and strong.</p>

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Do	Avoid
<p>Focus on changing eating & activity habits, rather than weight. The most positive contribution we can make to our children's growth is to support them in establishing eating and activity patterns for healthy growth. Keeping the focus on developing these habits is the priority for supporting their growth</p>	<p>Avoid classifying foods as 'good' and 'bad'. Food and nutrition are complex. Classifying certain food as 'good' or 'bad' is problematic and more likely to be associated with feelings of guilt when eating the so-called 'bad' foods. This applies to any terms that infer a judgement about food (such as 'clean' eating or 'fattening'). Instead, discuss that our bodies need a variety of whole foods and create a supportive environment. Only keep foods in the house that you want your child to eat regularly and have other foods when you are out or buy them for special occasions.</p>
<p>Allow your child respond to their natural hunger cues. Responding to hunger cues is essential for developing healthy eating patterns and for supporting your child's growth. If you have been trying to control the amount your child eats, it may be challenging to make the shift to trusting their hunger cues. This is an important skill for your child and your role is vital. See also: 'How do I know if my child is eating too much or not enough?'</p>	
<p>Build your child's media literacy. Talk with your child about the way media, particularly social media, and marketing presents bodies of certain shapes which are often unattainable. The emphasis on a certain 'look' contributes to greater body dissatisfaction. Support positive self-esteem and body image by empowering your child to recognise that exposure to images or messages about 'perfect' bodies or eating do not nurture a positive attitude to health, food and activity.</p>	<p>Avoid dieting and food fads. Your eating and exercise habits have a more powerful influence on your child than you might think. If you are dieting or restricting your eating, your child is more likely to be overly concerned about body shape and weight. Avoid cutting out food groups, following fad diets or taking supplements or pills for weight loss. Instead, model enjoyment of a wide range of foods and regular physical activity. 'Be the change you want to see'.</p>

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Further support

If you are concerned about your child's food intake, eating behaviours, growth or nutrition-related health, contact a GP, paediatrician or Accredited Practising Dietitian who can provide a comprehensive assessment that considers your child's medical history, eating patterns including mealtime experiences, physical activity and genetic factors.

Find an Accredited Practising Dietitian with experience in infant and child growth - <https://dietitiansaustralia.org.au/find-an-apd/>

The Butterfly Foundation - <https://butterfly.org.au/>

Feed your Instinct, Eating and Body Image Checklist: <https://feedyourinstinct.com.au/checklist/>

Eating Disorders Families Australia, Early identification: <https://edfa.org.au/parents-and-carer-support/eating-disorder-symptoms-early-identification/>

Inside Out Institute for Eating Disorders: <https://insideoutinstitute.org.au/>

Centre for Clinical Interventions - <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Disordered-Eating>