

# Body Image and Eating Problems

## What is the issue?

Over half of all adolescent girls try to lose weight. Dieting or overeating are common problems that affect many girls but they can also affect boys. Depression and poor self-esteem may be factors in problem eating habits.

The most serious eating disorders experienced by young people are *anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia nervosa*. In anorexia, a person worries about becoming fat or gaining weight no matter how thin they become. With bulimia, the person has repeated bouts of binge eating and then tries to compensate in ways such as dieting or vomiting.

**The best time to help your child develop a positive body image is well before their teens. Unrealistic ideas about looks and the "ideal body" can affect children and young people from very early ages. Young people are often highly conscious and critical of their own bodies. Self-criticism and poor body image may be factors in the development of eating disorders. Your own eating habits, sense of body image and attitudes can affect your child.**

Children and adolescents may compulsively over-eat to cope with feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt or anger. These young people may be a little overweight to obese. If young people have an eating disorder for a prolonged period of time their health and growth may be seriously affected. Girls who have begun to menstruate may miss periods.

Early and effective treatment for these disorders may prevent life-long and sometimes fatal problems.

Young people often take any comments others make on their weight, body shape or appearance very seriously. Parents may mistake the body changes associated with puberty as an unhealthy weight gain. The young person may respond by dieting, followed by binge eating which, in time, may lead to long term eating problems.

Young people may be very good at hiding their problems from their families. If parents are concerned about their child's eating they should seek advice and assistance at once.

Parents can help their child develop a healthy body image.

## What are the signs of an eating disorder?

Parents frequently ask how can they know if their child has an eating disorder. The following warning signs may alert families:

- They will often believe they are fat no matter how thin they become.
- They may avoid eating with the family or want to go to the bathroom straight after meals.
- They may eat large amounts of food without gaining weight (people with bulimia often overeat then make themselves vomit or use laxatives).
- They may appear excessively preoccupied with food and dieting.
- They may exercise excessively to lose weight.
- They may eat compulsively, hide food or eat in secret.
- They may wear loose clothes that hide their body.
- The child or adolescent may feel they have a sense of control when they say "no" to food.

It is sad, but true, that many young people dislike their bodies. They may feel fat and unattractive even if their mirror image shows otherwise. Girls often think they are fat even when they are not and boys may fear they are not big enough.

## Helping young people with eating disorders

You can help your child to develop a positive sense of body image in several ways.

- Point out that healthy, attractive, successful people come in many sizes and shapes.
- Help your child discover what they like and value about themselves.
- Discourage family members from criticising each other's appearance.
- Reassure your child about the changes to their body size and shape during puberty.
- Emphasise how these changes are part of growing from childhood to adulthood.
- Include the whole family in the goal of health and fitness (rather than single out an overweight child for a special regime).
- Encourage your child to express their emotions in effective and appropriate ways.
- Keep plenty of healthy snacks in the house such as fruit and bread.
- Explain how images of women on television and magazines are often changed to make them look slimmer.
- If a doctor determines your child needs to lose weight, adjust the family's exercise and eating habits to make it easier. Be clear about a healthy weight range for your child.

If you think your child has signs of an eating disorder discuss this with your general practitioner. They can make a referral to a child and adolescent mental health service.

Encourage healthy eating and exercise for the whole family.

### How to get help for eating disorders

- Your general practitioner
- Your local Area Health Service (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services.
- Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians and child psychologists.

If you would like more information about mental health and services contact:

**NSW Association for Mental Health, Mental Health Information Service**

Monday to Friday, 12.30pm - 4.30pm

Phone: (02) 9816 5688

Rural areas: 1800 674 200

Disturbed eating is very common in young people. Overeating may be related to tension, poor nutritional habits and food fads.

Bulimia and anorexia nervosa most commonly begin in adolescence. Studies show that many girls, as young as 6-8 years, believe an "ideal weight" is thinner than their own body.

Parents can encourage healthy eating and help their children feel good about their bodies.

**24 hour telephone services are:**

**Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800**  
**Lifeline 131 114**