

Identifying the warning signs of eating disorders



It's often difficult to pinpoint the signs and symptoms of eating disorders. Because most people with eating disorders believe that no one else understands, they often go to great lengths to hide it.

Eating disorders are emotionally devastating, can cause permanent physical damage and, in severe cases, even be fatal. Moreover, they wreak havoc with relationships, especially with family and often with friends, schoolmates, or colleagues at work.

There are four types of eating disorders: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating disorder, and eating disorders not otherwise specified.

Becoming aware of the signs and symptoms of eating disorders could help you save someone's life.

Physical warning signs

- Excessive weight loss or rapid fluctuation in weight.
- Dry or thinning hair.
- Dry skin and brittle nails.
- Dehydration.
- Fine hair on the face or limbs (called lanugo).
- Pale complexion, and/or a puffy appearance.
- Loss or irregularity of menstrual periods.
- Redness or calluses on the fingers or back of the hands (caused by friction of contact with teeth when inducing vomiting).
- Feeling cold when it is warm or complaining of cold hands and feet.
- Low blood sugar levels.
- Faintness, dizziness, or fatigue.
- Reduced concentration, memory, and thinking ability.
- Bowel problems such as constipation, diarrhoea, or cramps.
- Sore throat, indigestion, and heartburn.
- Bruising easily and prolonged healing of bruises and/or wounds.

Behavioural warning signs

- Persistent negative comments about the way they look.

- Preoccupation with food, calories, nutrition, and/or cooking.
- Restricting food intake or making excuses not to eat (even when thin), or overeating.
- Preferring to eat alone.
- Weighing themselves daily, sometimes more than once.
- Obsessive rituals.
- Wearing baggy clothes to conceal body shape.
- Hoarding or sneaking food.
- Making frequent trips to the bathroom after meals.
- Excessive, rigid exercise regimen; despite weather, fatigue, illness, or injury.
- Withdrawal from, or avoidance of, social situations because of weight and shape concerns.
- Evidence of use of laxatives, diuretics, purgatives, enemas, or emetics.
- Substance abuse.

Psychological warning signs

- Intense fear of weight gain.
- Preoccupation with body appearance or weight.
- Equating happiness or success with being thin.
- Moodiness and/or irritability.
- Reduced concentration, memory, and thinking ability.
- Anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts.
- Anxiety around meal times.
- Guilt or self-dislike.
- Perfectionism.
- Low self-esteem.

People with eating disorders normally deny having a problem and therefore don't seek help or stick to treatment programmes, often until they are well into the downward spiral.

If you think someone you love or know may have an eating disorder, it's important to get them to consider professional help.