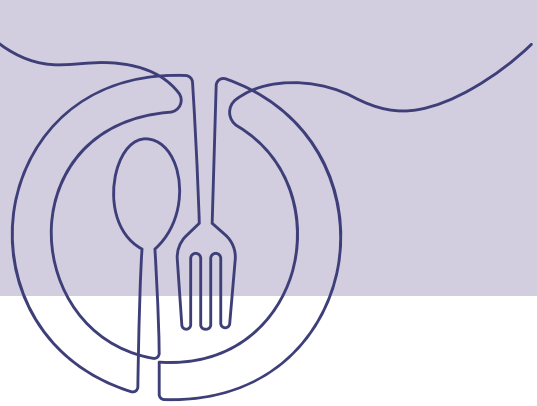
Eating disorder signs and symptoms



Eating disorders are not always about food. They can be ways that people cope with hard emotions, stress or a need for control. Getting help early can make a big difference. When parents and caregivers know what warning signs to look for, they can better support their child. It is also important to remember that not every young person will show the same signs, and one sign alone does not mean they have an eating disorder.

Parents and caregivers can cue into patterns and changes over time. The National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) provides the following signs and symptoms as warning signs of potential eating disorders.

Emotional and behavioral signs and symptoms:

- Preoccupation with weight loss, food, calories and dieting
- Refuses to eat certain foods and often eliminates whole food groups (carbohydrates, fats, etc.)
- Makes excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations involving food
- Develops food rituals (e.g., eating foods in certain orders, excessive chewing, rearranging food on a plate)
- Withdraws from friends and previously pleasurable activities and becomes more isolated and secretive
- Extreme concern with body size and shape
- Frequent checking in the mirror for perceived flaws in appearance
- Extreme mood swings



Physical signs and symptoms:

- Noticeable fluctuations in weight, both up and down
- Stomach cramps, other non-specific gastrointestinal complaints (constipation, acid reflux, etc.)
- Menstrual irregularities — primary or secondary amenorrhea (not starting the menstrual cycle or the loss of the menstrual cycle) or only experiencing a period when taking hormonal supplements
- Difficulties concentrating
- Abnormal laboratory findings (anemia, low thyroid and hormone levels, low potassium, low white and red blood cell counts) though some people with eating disorders do not have any laboratory abnormalities
- Dizziness, especially upon standing
- Fainting/syncope
- Feeling cold all the time
- Sleep problems
- Cuts and calluses across the top of finger joints (a result of inducing vomiting)
- Dental problems
- Dry skin and hair and brittle nails
- Fine hair on body (lanugo)
- Muscle weakness
- Yellow skin (in context of eating large amounts of carrots)
- Cold, mottled hands and feet or swelling of feet
- Poor wound healing
- Impaired immune functioning

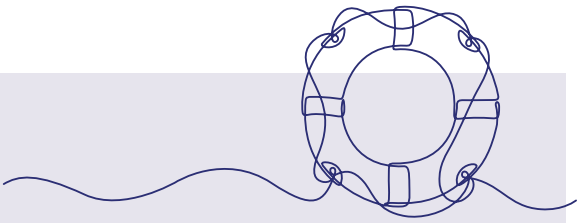
Common Thread
by Wolfson Children's

When to seek help

Reach out to a pediatrician, mental health professional or eating disorder specialist if you notice:

- Multiple signs occurring together
- Behaviors becoming more frequent or intense
- Physical symptoms or safety concerns
- Your child seems emotionally overwhelmed or stuck

If there are immediate safety concerns (fainting, rapid weight changes, purging behaviors or talk of self-harm), seek urgent medical or mental health support.



Need additional support?

Hotlines & support lines

ANAD helpline (Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)): 888.375.7767 — Peer led helpline; Line provides emotional support and referral information.

NAED (National Alliance for Eating Disorders): 866.662.1235
Calls are answered by a licensed clinician specialized in eating disorders; Line provides support and referral information.