

Key Information About Eating Disorders (EDs) For Parents & Caregivers

Facts

- Parents and caregivers want kids to develop a healthy relationship with food and their bodies.
- Families do not cause EDs! However, adults can talk about bodies and food at home in a way that promotes body dissatisfaction and dieting instead of health.
- Dieting in adolescents usually ends up causing weight gain.
- Body dissatisfaction in adolescents is the #1 predictor of early onset EDs.
- The majority of people with EDs aren't underweight.
- EDs can affect people of all ages, genders, body sizes, races, religions, and ethnicities.
- EDs are serious mental illnesses that can cause serious physical problems.
- EDs can be used to numb just like alcohol or drugs. It's not all about the food.
- Lack of enough food at home can lead to ED behaviors.
- Strength and physical fitness improve lifetime health outcomes more than weight loss and are more sustainable.

What does healthy eating and healthy movement mean?

- Abundant, satisfying, balanced, regular eating without set rules or restrictions apart from honoring family/cultural traditions and allergies.
- Moving your body for fun and to achieve athletic or personal adventure goals (but not to burn calories or lose weight).

Common symptoms

- Eating markedly less or more than usual or engaging in secretive eating
- Finding reasons to avoid eating with the family or others.
- Making more comments about weight or judgements about food quality or type
- Going to the bathroom immediately after eating (potentially to purge).
- Meaningful changes in weight in either direction (but many have minimal change in weight).

What parents and caregivers can do to help

- If you think your child might have an ED, seek an assessment by a therapist or dietitian with expertise. Virtual appointments are often available. Pediatrician may need to get involved, but there's a risk especially if child not formally underweight that they will minimize severity.
- Support and validate your child's emotions so that they are less likely to feel overwhelmed by them and try to numb out.
- Banning sweets or other foods usually makes kids more likely to binge on them. Barring allergies, it's best to have all foods be allowed and focus on moderation.
- Don't talk about your body or others' bodies positively or negatively. Make home a body neutral/accepting place gives kids a refuge from the toxic messages of peers and social media.
- Show your kids you eat without judgement or guilt. No diet talk at home.
- Exercise without talking about trying to change your body.
- If you have room for improvement, kids love to hear an adult say, "I've been doing this wrong, and I want to change. Let's do things differently around here."

Resources

Sick Enough: A Guide to the Medical Complications of Eating Disorders (Gaudiani)

[How to Raise an Intuitive Eater: Raising the Next Generation with Food and Body Confidence](#) (Brooks and Severson)

Raising Body Positive Teens (Darpinian, Sterling, and Aggarwal)

Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture (Sole-Smith)

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