

Key Information About Eating Disorders For School Nurses

Facts

- The majority of people with eating disorders aren't underweight.
- Eating disorders can affect people of all ages, genders, body sizes, races, religions, and ethnicities.
- Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that can cause serious physical problems.
- Strength and physical fitness improve lifetime health outcomes more than weight loss and are more sustainable, so the medical field needs to focus less on weight because that can drive eating disorders.
- Dieting in adolescents usually ends up causing weight gain.
- Body dissatisfaction in adolescents is the #1 predictor of early onset eating disorders.

Common symptoms of eating disorders in students

- Eating markedly less or more than usual
- Making more comments about weight or judgements about food quality or type
- Meaningful changes in weight in either direction (but many have minimal change in weight)
- Fatigue and lightheadedness, irritability
- Worsening athletic performance, excessive workouts, or exercising outside of scheduled practices
- Teacher expressing concern about an eating disorder.
- Friends reporting they are throwing away their lunch at school, eating less, or going to the bathroom immediately after eating (potentially to purge)

Common signs you might see in your office

- Cold hands and feet, wearing baggy or unusually warm clothing, bradycardia at rest that goes much faster (e.g. 75% increase) after just walking down the hall and back, loss of period or delay in onset of first period, hypotension (usually not formally orthostatic unless very volume depleted from purging), lanugo hair on face, swollen cheeks if purging by vomiting, hypoglycemia (worth a glucose check if they come to you feeling dizzy, foggy, sweaty, anxious, or nauseated)

If you suspect one of your students has an eating disorder

- Seek out a quiet conversation with the student, let them know you've been worried about them, and pause to see if they begin to share. If not, ask, "Could I ask you to share with me how your relationship with food and your body has been going lately?" A student who is struggling is more likely to get defensive or immediately respond that they are fine/minimize others' concerns.
- Depending on the age of the student, concerns should usually be shared with parents/caregivers.
- Best initial response is for student/parents to seek an assessment by a therapist or dietitian with eating disorder expertise. Virtual appointments are often available. Pediatricians will need to get involved, but there's a risk especially if child not formally underweight that they will minimize severity.
- Lead the change in your school never to do public weigh-ins or BMI evaluations; these never improve health but do risk causing shame and triggering an eating disorder.

Resources

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

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