



Eating disorders in adolescents by Dr Mélissandre Noël

What is an eating disorder?

There are three main types of eating disorders. The first one is *anorexia*, where your child or teenager will refuse to eat adequate amount of food/calories due to an irrational fear of being or becoming fat. The second one is called *bulimia*, where your child will engage in “binging” (extreme overeating), and then use “purging methods” (self-induced vomiting, laxatives) to avoid gaining weight. The third one is called *binging*, where your child will grossly overeat without using any “purging methods”. When someone suffers from an eating disorder, it can be a mix of all of those. Your teenager could be alternating periods of *anorexia*, *bulimia*, and *binging*.

Who is at risk of getting an eating disorder?

Doctors are not 100% sure why eating disorders happen. We think it is a combination of genetic and social factors. Eating disorders will usually first appear in teenage years or early adulthood, and girls are more at risk than boys. Teenagers can be easily influenced by unhealthy body images they are exposed to in their day to day life (on TV, in magazines, on social medias, etc.). An adolescent who has low self-esteem, is in any kind of mental distress, has a fear of becoming overweight (either by seeing constant images of rod thin models, or from being teased by peers in school, or other), or has someone in their family suffering from an eating disorder is also more at risk of developing one.

How can I tell if my teenage child is suffering from an eating disorder?

Being a teenager is tough and comes with many challenges. This is why it is important, as a parent, to try to recognize if your child is suffering from an eating disorder so you can get them the help they need.

We have to remember that an eating disorder is not really about food. It's usually more about keeping control of one's body, fear of losing control, etc. It often goes hand in hand with other mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and drug abuse.

The signs to look for are: anxiety/depression, low self-esteem, being overly critical of themselves, dieting even when not overweight, extremely rapid weight loss that they might try to hide with shapeless clothes, excessive exercising, being terrified of becoming fat, strange eating habits (avoiding meals, eating in secret, hiding food in room, high calorie food disappearing from the cupboards, etc.). If your child has constant mood swings or spends an unusual amount of time in the bathroom after meals, those should also raise a red flag.

What are the consequences of suffering from an eating disorder?

Eating disorders can affect every aspects of your teenager's life. It affects mental health, physical health, school, relationships, etc. The physical effects of eating disorders depend



on the type of eating disorder, but as teenagers will usually have more than one type, they can suffer from many of those consequences.

Anorexia:

- Loss of menstruation (periods stopping)
- Fragile bones
- Irregular heart beat
- Slow pulse, slow breathing, lower body temperature
- Damage to kidneys, liver, brain, heart

Bulimia:

- Damage to the esophagus from vomiting
- Damage to teeth from vomiting
- Abnormal levels of potassium in blood (can cause irregular heart beat as well)

Binging:

- High blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, diabetes

What should I do if I think that my child has an eating disorder?

If you suspect that your child or teenager is struggling with an eating disorder, don't keep silent. Your child needs you to advocate and speak up for them. It can be a long road to recovery and your child will need you to support him/her all the way.

Talk to your family doctor, we are usually well equipped to start the discussion with you and your teenager. As a doctor, I would usually order some blood tests and ECG (heart test) to make sure that your child's organs are not suffering. Then, we usually talk about psychotherapy (counseling) which can be extremely helpful, and sometimes medications can also be prescribed to help. In Singapore, we have some wonderful Eating Disorder programs where psychiatrist, dietician, counselors, etc. will work together to give your child their best chance at recovery.



Dr Méli Noël is a Canadian trained doctor based at IMC Jelita who has run workshops for teens and has a special interest in adolescent health. Please call 6465 4440 to make an appointment.