

Safeguarding Factsheet

Eating Disorders

Understanding the relationship between eating disorders, social media and the COVID-19 pandemic will help support you to respond to the needs of children and young people. This factsheet has been developed from new and emerging statistics in local and national reports from support services and health professionals. It provides a summary of the dynamic challenges and hidden risks that young people face and how you can best support them.

The Facts

- Across the UK, health professionals in **England, Wales and Scotland** have warned of a **'huge rise'** with reported cases doubling, tripling and in some cases quadrupling¹
- **43%** of young people with an eating disorder report attempts from strangers online to **engage in sexual activity** happening often, compared with **13%** of those without an eating disorder²
- Individuals with a family member who has an eating disorder are **more likely to develop one**³
- Young people with **eating disorders** are among the **most likely to experience cyberbullying** 31% of young people with an eating disorder report seeing pro anorexia and suicide content online⁴
- **23%** have experienced someone trying to persuade them into **unwanted sexual activity online**⁵
- Anorexia nervosa has the **highest mortality rate of any mental health issue among adolescents**⁶

Recognising the signs

- » **Refusing to eat certain foods**; engagement with fad diets/new food practices (no sugar, no carbs, veganism, paleo etc) or **preoccupation with calories**
- » **Withdrawal or less interest in social activities** that were previously enjoyable
- » **Making frequent comments about feeling 'fat' or 'overweight'** or a preoccupation with looking in the mirror to check for flaws

References

¹<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/paediatricians-warn-parents-be-alert-signs-eating-disorders-over-holidays>

²<https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Internet-Matters-Refuge-And-Risk-Report.pdf>

³<https://www.priorygroup.com/eating-disorders/eating-disorder-statistics>

⁴<https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Internet-Matters-Refuge-And-Risk-Report.pdf>

⁵<https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Internet-Matters-Refuge-And-Risk-Report.pdf>

⁶<https://www.priorygroup.com/eating-disorders/eating-disorder-statistics>



- » **Drinking excessive amounts of water/low calorie drinks (black coffee/diet fizzy drinks)**
 - » Sudden **poor oral hygiene**, or brushing of teeth more than necessary
 - » For females, they may **miss their period** or have other menstrual irregularities
 - » **Impaired immune system** or healing problems
 - » Irritability, low mood and other **mental health issues**
 - » **Maintaining excessive exercise habits** despite weather, fatigue, social life or other obligations
 - » **The disappearance of large amounts of food**
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Tips for Parents/Carers and Safeguarding Professionals

- Understand the **signs** of eating disorders and decide how **best you can approach** the issue if you are concerned about a child in your care
- It can be **helpful to address behaviours and habits** rather than focusing on food or body image
- You should **avoid blaming or judging a young person**, remember that they are struggling with mental health and are likely in need of compassion and support
- Encourage the young person **to understand that with the right support, things can change**
- **Avoid complimenting them on appearance** – this might be well intended but could exacerbate existing feelings of insecurity
- **At mealtimes avoid watching, discussing or praising eating** – this could also intensify fixation on food and mealtimes.
- Make sure a young person has appropriate supports and isn't solely relying on social media as a form of peer support.
- **Be aware of how content on social media may not be helpful** for a young person to engage with if they're feeling vulnerable.
- Make an appointment with the GP for further advice, support and treatment.

Glossary

Anorexia Nervosa

An eating disorder characterised by obsessive behaviour surrounding weight with an often-total aversion to food.

Anorexia Athletica

An eating disorder characterised by obsessive behaviour surrounding weight and extreme/compulsive exercise.

ARFID (Avoidant and Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)

An eating disorder characterised by the restriction of certain foods based on smell, taste, texture or previous experience.

Binge Eating Disorder (BED)

An eating disorder characterised by a compulsion to overeat frequently, often with no sense of control.

Bulimia Nervosa

An eating disorder characterised by a cycle of bingeing and purging. Those with bulimia may induce themselves to vomit or use laxatives to 'get rid' of calories.

Binge

A word used to describe a period of intense and excessive consumption of food. Note what constitutes a binge is subjective, a young person may see all eating as a binge.

Purge

A word used to describe the post-binge compensation, when someone will attempt to remove the extra food from their body through various methods such as vomiting, laxatives or excessive exercise.

Bodychecking

Examining, measuring and monitoring your body shape and weight over time. These behaviours can be compulsive and obsessive.

Pro-anna/Pro-mia Content

These terms refer to content online that is 'pro-anorexia' and 'pro-bulimia', this content encourages the behaviours and mindset associated with eating disorders.

Amenorrhea

The absence of a woman's menstrual cycle for more than three months.

Recovery

The journey towards being free from disordered eating behaviours and mindset. Recovery is different for everyone and can be a long process.

Relapse

When a person is in eating disorder recovery and they revert to their disordered behaviours and mindset. If this happens – all is not lost, recovery is a journey not a destination.



Food Rituals

A set of habits or compulsions based around food which can include cutting food into smaller pieces, eating in a certain order and chewing or regurgitating several times.

Safe Foods

Young people with an eating disorder often view 'safe' foods as foods that will not make them gain weight or foods that do not threaten overeating. Common 'safe' foods include vegetables, jelly, green tea and diet drinks.

Fear Foods

Young people with an eating disorder may view 'fear' foods as foods that will make them gain weight and make them overeat. Common 'fear' foods include bread, chips, nuts and high sugar sweets such as ice cream.

Orthexia

An unofficial term referring to an obsession with healthy eating, often associating food as 'pure' and 'good' versus 'bad and 'impure'.