

# Understanding and addressing teen eating issues

## Overview

Eating issues and disorders among teens have become increasingly prevalent, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. As parents, it's crucial to recognise early signs, understand the origins, and know how to approach and support your teen if you suspect an eating disorder. This fact sheet covers essential points on this topic.



The rate of possible eating problems in 2023 was 12.3% in children aged 11 to 16 years. This rose to 59.4% in young people aged 17 to 19 years.

Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023

## Where do eating issues come from?

Eating disorders in adolescents are complex and develop due to a multitude of factors, not just issues with food and weight. They often stem from underlying issues such as low self-esteem, trauma, personality traits like perfectionism, or genetic predispositions.

- Biological factors: Genetics and brain chemistry can play a role.
- Psychological factors: Low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and OCD.
- Environmental factors: Cultural pressures, trauma, and family dynamics.

## Diagnosable eating disorders

1. Anorexia Nervosa: Severe restriction of food intake leading to significant weight loss.
2. Bulimia Nervosa: Binge eating followed by purging.
3. Binge Eating Disorder: Recurrent episodes of eating large quantities of food without purging.
4. Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorders (OSFED): Eating disorders that don't fit the above categories but are still significant.

## Why are more teens presenting with eating issues?

- Increased stress: Academic, social, and family pressures are more increased.
- Media and social pressure: Constant exposure to idealised images and social comparisons on highly visual social media can create a downward spiral in self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.
- COVID-19 impact: The pandemic increased mental health issues, especially anxiety, which lead to higher rates of eating disorders.

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Eating disorders are really not just about food and weight. Generally speaking, food and weight issues are the behaviours that are used in response to underlying distress that can be about many different things.

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## Warning signs parents might notice

Early warning signs may include mood changes, social withdrawal, and loss of interest in activities rather than just visible changes in eating habits. The signs and symptoms of eating problems can vary from person to person. However, a combination of the below symptoms could be a sign that a child might need additional support:

- Preoccupation with checking calorie or other ingredient content in food eating a restricted amount or range of foods
- Avoiding meals or certain foods
- Obsession with food, dieting, or body image/appearance
- Binge eating
- More controlling behaviours such as rules about eating, insisting on making their own meals or only using certain utensils and cutlery
- Secretiveness or avoiding eating with others
- Feeling guilty after eating
- Repeatedly weighing themselves
- Vomiting after eating, or going to the toilet immediately after eating
- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Long-term weight stagnation or failure to grow
- Complaining of poor concentration, dizziness, tiredness or feeling cold
- Getting stressed at mealtimes
- Low mood, anxiety or irritability
- Withdrawal from social situations and other activities
- Other conditions: Many teens with eating disorders also suffer with depression, anxiety, OCD, BDD and self-harm. Parents might recognise these interconnected challenges and look for treatments that address both the eating disorder and accompanying mental health issue for a better recovery.

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### **Why parents notice changes during holidays**

- Routine disruptions: Holidays often disrupt regular eating patterns and routines.
- Increased social interactions: More family gatherings and meals might highlight unusual eating behaviors.
- Stress and anxiety: Holidays can be stressful, exacerbating underlying issues.

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### **Approaches for healthy eating habits and behaviours**

- Regular family meals: Promote a routine with balanced meals.
- Positive food talk: Focus on the nutritional value and pleasure of eating rather than calories or weight.
- Model healthy behaviour: Demonstrate a balanced approach to food and body image.

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### **Conversations parents should have**

- Open and non-judgemental: Encourage your teen to talk about their feelings.
- Express concern, not blame: Focus on specific behaviors that concern you.
- Listen actively: Validate their feelings and avoid offering unsolicited advice.

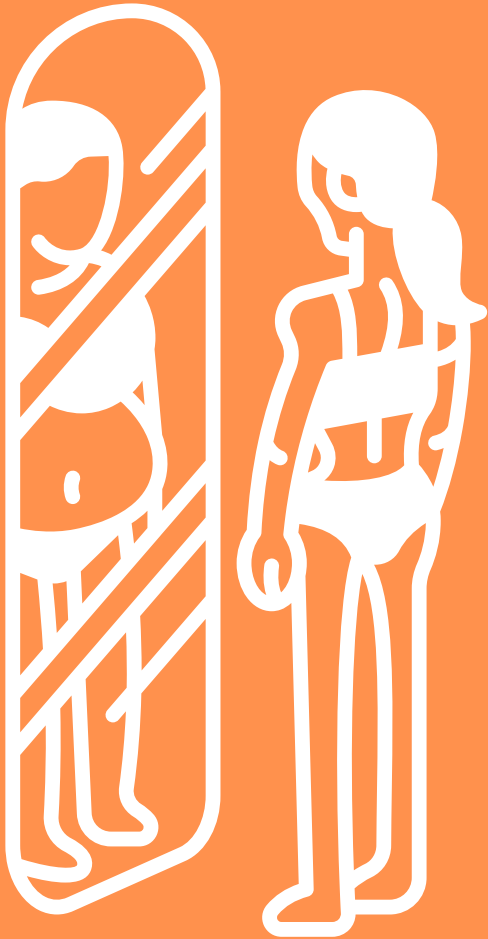
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### **Conversations parents should avoid**

- Avoid criticism: Don't comment on their weight, shape, or eating habits negatively.
- No comparisons: Avoid comparing your teen to others.
- Don't oversimplify: Recognize that eating disorders are complex and not just about food.

# Importance of early intervention

Early intervention can significantly improve recovery outcomes. It's crucial to seek help as soon as you notice potential issues.



- **Talk to Your Teen:** Express your concerns and what you might have noticed and listen to their perspective.
- **Seek Professional Help:** Start conversations early with your child about your concerns and seek professional support promptly, as early intervention can improve outcomes.
- **You can speak with your GP and research your local NHS Eating Disorder services** to see if they accept self-referrals. It's important to gather relevant information and be ready to discuss the sensitive nature of eating issues, consider how to address topics such as weight and eating habits, and decide if it's helpful for your child to be present for all parts of the conversation. Be clear about your expectations with your child and ensure the GP is aware of the sensitive nature of the discussion.
- **Create a Supportive Environment:** Reduce stressors and promote a positive atmosphere at home.

## What treatments might look like

- **Medical Monitoring:** Regular health check-ups and monitoring of vital signs.
- **Nutritional Counselling:** Guidance on balanced eating and nutritional needs.
- **Therapy:** Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), family-based therapy, and other therapeutic approaches.
- **Medications:** For coexisting conditions like anxiety or depression.

## Helping someone with eating challenges

- **Medical Professionals:** Pediatricians, dietitians, psychologists, and psychiatrists.
- **Specialised Clinics:** Eating disorder clinics and treatment centers.
- **Schools:** Both parents and schools need to work together clearly and collaboratively when addressing eating issues in students. Schools may train their pastoral teams with sufficient knowledge on eating issues and body image to be able to communicate with parents, provide updates, and direct them to external specialist resources. Since most schools cannot afford a full-time eating disorder expert, they must clearly outline available support and strategies for handling eating issues and restrictive challenges, ensuring parents are well-informed about the school's approach and available resources.
- **Support Groups:** For both the teenager with the eating issue and other family members.

## Nutritional approaches

As part of the treatment for an adolescent eating disorder, a dietician specialising in eating disorders may be involved in the multidisciplinary approach to treating adolescents, as nutritional imbalances can occur even without significant weight loss. They assess the adolescent's physical and medical condition, monitor nutrition intake, adjust diets, and supplement with vitamins and minerals to prevent deficiencies and manage risks like refeeding syndrome.

Dieticians also consider specific dietary preferences, such as vegetarian or vegan diets, and unique symptoms and needs to ensure all nutritional needs are met so that Dieticians can support adolescents in making sustainable changes.

- **Balanced Diet:** Ensuring a variety of nutrients.
- **Gradual Refeeding:** Carefully monitored reintroduction of food for those who are malnourished.
- **Supplements:** Vitamins and minerals to address deficiencies.

## How to Support Other Family Members



Education: Informing family members about eating disorders.



Open Communication: Encouraging open discussions about feelings and concerns.



Support Networks: Joining support groups for families dealing with eating disorders.

## Conclusion

Understanding and addressing teen eating issues requires a comprehensive approach involving awareness, early intervention, professional help, and supportive family dynamics to offer quick and effective support for their recovery.

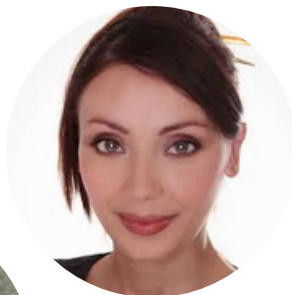
With insight & expertise from:



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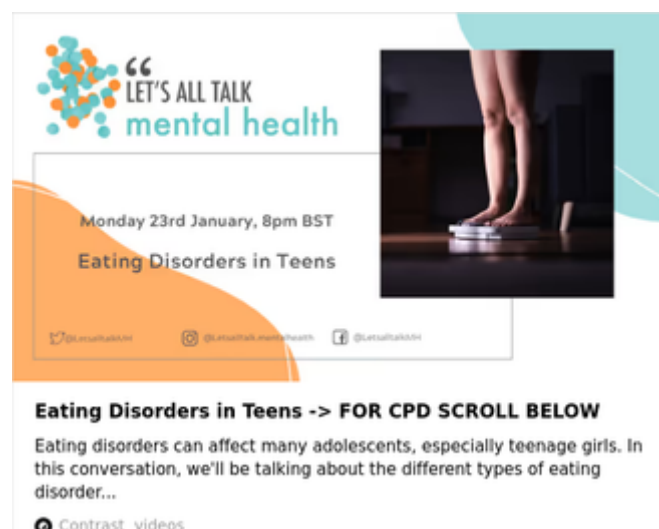
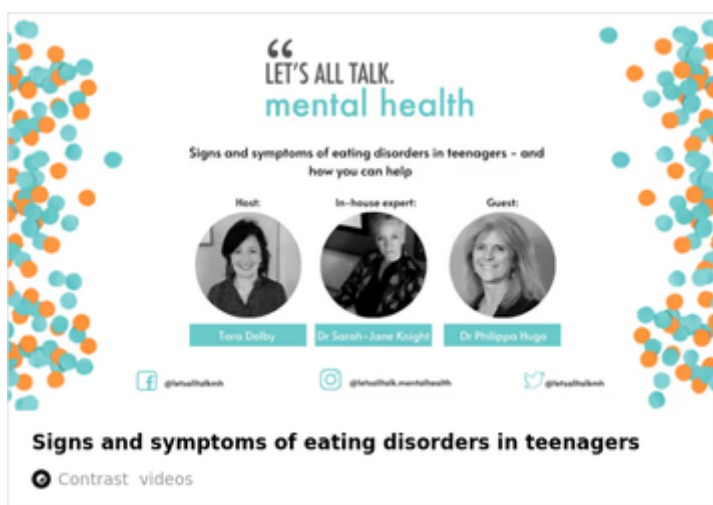
Dr Pippa Hugo



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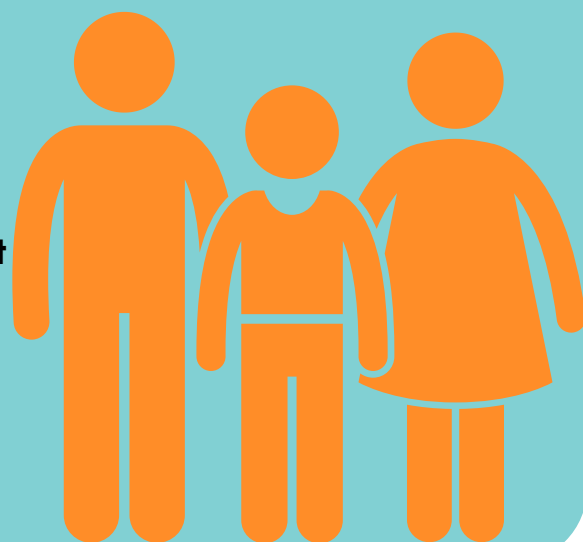
# “ LET'S ALL TALK mental health

There are sessions on the [Let's all Talk Mental Health hub](#) for you to view on Eating Disorders and your teen including the talks linked below. All talks are provided FREE to watch by your school.



## Other Resources for Parents

1. **Beat (National Eating Disorder Charity)**  
[beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://beateatingdisorders.org.uk)
2. **Feast (Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders)** [feast-ed.org](http://feast-ed.org)
3. **Eva Musby's Website** [anorexiafamily.com](http://anorexiafamily.com)
4. **London Center for Eating Disorders and Body Image**  
[londoncenter.co.uk](http://londoncenter.co.uk)



This factsheet is for advice purposes. Please remember that we're not offering medical or clinical health services specific to your situation. If you need help, please contact your GP or other healthcare professionals – don't wait to get help if you or your young one needs it.