

# How do I know if my child has an eating disorder?

“ My daughter has lost over a stone and become very distant and moody. But my friend says she is just a normal teenage girl ”

Eating disorders commonly develop from the age of 14. This is a time when young people are becoming more independent and parents often have less control over the food they eat.

It can also be a time when your relationship with your child goes through many changes, often resulting in difficult conflicts. Equally, your child may become more distant from you.

It can be difficult to know whether changes in your child's behaviour are the result of normal teenage development, or whether they are signs of an eating disorder.

## What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is not primarily about food and weight. Eating disorders develop when a person becomes dependent upon food to cope with difficult feelings and emotions.

There are two main types of eating disorders:

**Anorexia** involves severely restricting what you eat in order to lose weight. Sufferers lose a large amount of weight but believe themselves to be fat and have a great fear of putting on weight. People with anorexia have a fear of putting on weight. The intensity of this fear is profound and usually described as a phobia of normal body weight i.e. an irrational fear, not of being fat, but of being a normal weight.

People with anorexia can either be **restrictive** – they restrict their calorie intake and engage in excessive exercise or **bulimic**, eating a large amount of food at once then inducing vomiting.

**Bulimia** involves eating large amounts of food, then making yourself sick so your body does not absorb the food. Bulimia involves binge eating but at normal body weight. It occurs at an average age of 18.

All eating disorders are likely to change the way you live your life. Your child is likely to become more withdrawn, secretive and have sudden mood swings.

“ I felt I had lost all control in my life. My friends had moved on and I wasn't doing well at school. Losing weight was the one thing I could do – food became the one thing I could control. ”

## What are the different types of eating disorders?

Eating disorders are complex problems which are expressed in behaviour, emotions and have a physical impact upon the sufferer's body. Signs will vary for each type of disorder and every individual is different. However, if your child displays a large proportion of the physical, behavioural and psychological signs, he or she may have an eating disorder.

For more advice see [My child has an eating disorder – how do I get help?](#)

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## Anorexia – signs and symptoms

Physical signs	Behavioural signs	Psychological signs
Sudden/severe weight loss	Secretive and distant	Intense fear of gaining weight i.e. a phobia of being a normal weight
Periods stop	Wearing baggy clothes	Frequent references to “being fat”
Difficulty sleeping	Over-exercising	Depression
Dizziness	Lying about eating meals	Mood swings and emotional
Stomach pain	Difficulty concentrating	Diet obsession
Feeling cold		
Constipation		

## Bulimia – signs and symptoms

Physical signs	Behavioural signs	Psychological signs
Sore throat	Eating large quantities without gaining weight	Depression, anxiety and anger
Stomach pain	Vomiting after eating/going to the toilet immediately after eating	Guilt
Irregular periods	Being secretive	Mood swings
Difficulty sleeping		Feelings of loss of control which extend to other parts of your life
Mouth infections		
Sensitive or damaged teeth		
Constipation		

## Where can I find out more?

Go to [www.newbridge-health.org.uk/information](http://www.newbridge-health.org.uk/information) for more information.