

My child has an eating disorder. How can I get help?

I think my child has an eating disorder – what should I do?

The first step is to discuss your concerns with your daughter or son. They will be experiencing many difficult emotions and may deny there is a problem, become angry with you, or withdraw. You may need to raise the subject several times before your child takes on board your concerns. Each time, emphasise that you want to offer help and support.

If you have concerns, it is very important that you raise them, however difficult that may be. Eating disorders rarely get better without treatment and if left without intervention, can become increasingly resistant to treatment.

Once your child agrees to discuss their problems with a professional, your GP is the best person to see together. Your GP can refer you to a range of specialists with extensive experience of treating eating disorders. These specialists include psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, dieticians and nutritionists.

Will my child have to go into hospital?

Once your child is diagnosed as having an eating disorder, he or she will be given a treatment programme to address his or her individual needs.

This may involve sessions with a psychiatrist, psychologist or counsellor to understand the cause of the problem and how the eating disorder is best treated. Your child will only be admitted to hospital if this is in their best interests.

What else can I do to help my child?

You have taken the most important first step and will have the support of a range of specialist health professionals.

The process of treatment can often take up to two years and raise some difficult issues for the whole family. You may be asked to take part in family therapy. This is not because you have done anything wrong as a parent. Family therapy is important because family relationships shape the way young people experience the world and need to be explored as they seek to overcome their eating disorder.

As your child progresses through his or her treatment, you will be given advice on how to manage mealtimes.

Mealtimes can be the most stressful experiences for the child with an eating disorder, their parents and siblings. Every child and family are different and professionals will help you to find ways of making mealtimes as calm and positive as possible.

Try not to police your child's eating or engage in battles over food consumption. Your child's health professionals will be responsible for their overall nutrition and physical well being.

There are many good support groups for both people with eating disorders and their families. Dealing with an eating disorder is an extremely stressful experience for the whole family and you are likely to need support, as well as supporting your child.