

# Adolescent Girls Battling Eating Disorders

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There is an epidemic of eating disorders gripping many adolescent girls in the U.S. today. Statistics show that anorexia is the third most common chronic illness among adolescents. Ninety-five percent of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25. Fifty percent of girls between the ages of 11 and 13 see themselves as overweight. These disorders include: compulsive overeating, body dysmorphia, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia. The two most common are bulimia and anorexia, both of which can begin early in childhood.

There are many factors that contribute to eating disorders, including genetics (predisposition), cultural standards, pressure from peers, society and family history. There is evidence to suggest young women who struggle with anxiety and depression or obsessive compulsive behaviors are at higher risk for developing an eating disorder.

Those who battle anorexia suffer extreme weight loss to the point of emaciation and starvation. Teens with anorexia often cling to the irrational belief they are overweight regardless of how thin they become. Girls resort to starving themselves and seriously damage their body's chemical balance. At times there is permanent damage to the body.

Bulimia is different from anorexia. Binging is the hallmark of this disorder, which is followed by purging through vomiting or laxative use. The cycle of binging, purging and severe dieting can threaten hormonal imbalance, dehydration, and depletion of vital nutrients to the organs.

When young women struggle with an eating disorder, they succumb to a set of beliefs and false images of themselves. These beliefs can slowly creep into a girl's life and show themselves in patterns of hiding, purging, counting calories and excessive exercise. Parents may see signs that concern them, but their daughter could also look fairly normal. When a girl is confronted with her parents' concerns, there is often a response of dismissal, defensiveness, vagueness and denial. Parents can feel confused, doubtful, frustrated and unsure about their own perceptions. Frequently, anxiety and tension builds in relationships in the home, and family members can begin to feel a heavy burden of stress.

Parents, there is hope and help for you and your child. The first step is to begin to build a team of support, who will help you make decisions about your daughter and substantiate a diagnosis. This team will help you help your child back to health. Below is a list of professionals you might consider adding to your team:

- Primary care physician
- Psychotherapist for individual counsel as well as family counseling

-Nutritionist

In addition to these professionals, families have found help in:

-Organizations dealing with eating disorders (Find them by typing in “eating disorders” on a search engine like Google, Yahoo, Bing)

-Church groups

-Pastors

-Trusted family and friends

The team you assemble will work in cooperation with you and with each other as you seek the best treatment to reverse the serious effects of the eating disorder. Parents need support and care as they walk with their child through the ups and downs of treatment. Treatment is a process. It takes time and energy. A child with an eating disorder needs good rest and kind, loving support and encouragement through the process, but so do his or her parents. Ask for help. It is the first step in recovery.

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