

# Family Friendly Factsheet

## Eating Disorders



Although usually associated with teenagers, many types of eating disorders may affect younger children. However, the causes, characteristics and treatments differ from those experienced by adults and older children.

### Which eating disorders can occur in young children?

#### *Childhood-onset anorexia nervosa*

Anorexia is a well known eating disorder which tends to occur in adolescence but can begin in childhood, the condition is not found in children of a pre-school age but can affect school age children. Those affected have a strong desire to lose weight and a distorted image of their body shape. They avoid eating especially foods which are high in calories and usually have a low body weight for their age. Children who develop anorexia tend to set high standards and have a perfectionist attitude.

#### *Childhood-onset bulimia nervosa*

Like anorexia, bulimia is most common amongst adolescents, but can occur in younger children. The most prevalent sign of bulimia is the binge and purge cycle. Those affected eat large amounts of food in a short space of time. This brings feelings of guilt and causes the child to make themselves sick or take laxatives in an attempt to get rid of the calories they have consumed. Those suffering from bulimia feel that they have a lack of control, a lack of self confidence and a distorted view of their body shape. They may have a high, normal or low body weight which makes bulimia difficult to recognise.

#### *Food Avoidance Emotional Disorder (FAED)*

FAED usually affects children between the ages of five and sixteen and is often mistaken for anorexia or anxiety as sufferers avoid eating. In FAED, emotional problems such as sadness or worrying affect the appetite of the sufferer. Unlike anorexia, those affected by

FAED are not worried about their body shape and recognise that they need to eat.

#### *Functional dysphasia/food phobia*

Most common in school age children but also found in adolescents, this disorder is caused by the fear of eating solid foods and usually the sufferers feel that such foods will cause them to gag, vomit or choke. Those affected are not usually worried about their weight or body shape.

#### *Selective eating/extreme faddiness*

Although selective eating has been observed in all age groups, it is most common in children of a preschool or school age. Those affected eat a very small range of foods, maybe as few as five items, and do not like to try new foods. Some sufferers may gag when presented with a new food, however have no problems when swallowing their favourite foods. Most children affected by selective eating are of a healthy weight and do not have issues with their body image.

#### *Restrictive eating/poor appetite*

Children affected by restrictive eating seem to be uninterested in food and are unaffected by emotional problems. They tend to eat a normal range of foods but have a small appetite, although they are not concerned with losing weight. This is most commonly observed in children of a preschool or school age and is usually harmless as children tend to grow and develop normally. However, if the problem persists for several years, issues with development may occur.

#### *Food refusal*

This condition is most common in children of a preschool age but is also found in school age children. These children tend to eat favourite foods without any problems or may eat normally in certain situations but not in others. Those affected are not worried about losing weight or their body image and tend to be of a



normal weight and in good health. It is thought that worrying or unhappiness may be a cause of food refusal.

#### *Inappropriate texture of food for age*

This condition usually occurs in preschool children but is also found in those of a school age. Those affected by this disorder will only eat pureed or semi solid food, instead of solid foods. When given solid foods, children tend to gag, spit out the food or refuse to eat it. Most children eat a good range of foods and maintain a healthy weight however; the condition tends to cause problems at lunchtime in school age children.

#### **How are eating disorders in children identified?**

Eating disorders can be difficult to recognise in children as they are beginning to develop their likes and dislikes and issues surrounding food such as refusal or avoidance can be explained in a number of different ways such as a dislike of the sight or smell of a food. It is important to remember that eating disorders are rare amongst young children and most children will go through phases of picky eating. However, if there is significant weight loss or gain, if the child becomes excessively worried about their weight or appearance, fearful of weight gain or begins to eat in secret and these symptoms have been persistent for at least one month, visit a GP for advice.

#### **How are eating disorders in children treated?**

Treatment is usually undertaken by a doctor, nutritionist, dietitian or therapist and focuses on helping children to cope with their eating behaviours and begin to look at food in a different way. The professional will usually cover the issues of body size, shape, eating and food.

#### **Who can help?**

As those affected by eating disorders are often reluctant to acknowledge a problem, the

family plays an important part in both the identification and the treatment. There are also organisations such as the National Centre for Eating Disorders, the Eating Disorders Association and the Royal College of Psychiatrists which provide information on childhood eating disorders.

#### **More information**

National Centre for Eating Disorders

<http://www.eating-disorders.org.uk/>

The Eating Disorders Association

<http://www.b-eat.co.uk/Home>

The Royal College of Psychiatrists

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfofor/all/problems/eatingdisorders.aspx>