



TIPS AND TRICKS FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS WHEN DEALING WITH CHILD AND ADOLESCENT EATING DISORDERS

What does an eating disorder look like in children?

- Failure to make gains in height or weight at annual well child checks
- Crossing two percentiles in weight for age, height for age, or BMI
- Eating disorders occur in all sized children – below average weight, average weight, and above average weight.
Cannot diagnose an eating disorder based on physical appearance!
- Isolating socially and/or at meal times, making excuses for not eating meals at school or home
- Questions about appearance or reassurance-seeking:
“Do my arms look bigger?” or “Does this make me look fat?”
- Dieting/cutting out food groups: gluten free, no dairy, becoming vegetarian or vegan
- Parents report increased anxiety (general and/or around food) or something being “just not right”

DON'T:

- Tell the patient to “just eat”. Remember this is about much more than food.
- Comment on a patient’s weight or appearance (or your own).
- Discuss your food views or personal weight loss goals in common patient areas.
- Ask a patient if they’re hungry. Eating disorder patients often WILL NOT eat when they’re hungry. Also, when they are getting better and weight restoring, feeling hungry makes them anxious.

DO:

- Offer simple messages of reassurance (repeat often!):
“Food is medicine for your body.”
“There are no good or bad foods”, or “All foods have value.”
“Our bodies need different foods to be healthy.”
“Your body is still growing. We need to feed your growth.”
“Your body needs fuel every few hours.”
- Weigh patients backwards at appointments. Don’t write their weight on a piece of paper and leave it where they can see.
- Connect your patient with an eating disorder therapist, eating disorder dietitian, and a psychiatrist if indicated.
- Educate the patient and family on the medical consequences of an eating disorder. Understanding what is happening in their bodies can be a powerful motivator.
- Stress that child/teen nutrition needs are very high – just like a growing baby. It is almost never okay for a child or teen to be on a diet – even if the rest of the family is doing it.
- Ask patients about/encourage their talents and interests that aren’t related to physical appearance. This will help in developing a healthy sense of self.

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