

Eating and Body Image Concerns

Children who have an eating or body image issue may hide their behavior and concerns about weight from friends and family.



Eating and body image issues range from unhealthy eating to serious conditions, such as anorexia. Problems with food, fear of being fat, or fear of being perceived as fat may point to a mental health issue that can lead to serious and even deadly medical conditions.

Body image concerns and dieting fads are an increasingly common problem among children, especially girls. Throughout childhood, it is normal for children to be concerned about the way they look, their weight, and the type of food they consume. However, when a child begins to become obsessed with food, his or her shape or weight, and develops physical problems, it is possible that the child may have a mental health issue.

The following is a list of typical signs and symptoms of eating and body image concerns. Your child may have an eating or body image concern if he or she:

- Fears gaining weight or becoming fat
- Is extremely dissatisfied with body shape or size, including feeling fat even if he or she is of normal weight or is underweight
- Has unexplained weight change greater than 10 pounds
- Changes size in clothing
- Has irregular menstrual periods or no longer has periods
- Develops a low sense of self-esteem
- Feels worthless because of his or her weight
- Has a poor appetite
- Is constantly dieting even though he or she is not overweight
- Eats very little and is obviously avoiding fatty foods
- Eats and then vomits to get rid of the food, including binge eating
- Eats and then exercises much more than is typical
- Over-exercises or has an obsessive attitude about physical activity
- Becomes increasingly isolated from friends and family and has difficulty eating foods in front of others
- Prepares food as if carrying out a ritual (for example, he or she may cut food up into tiny pieces)
- Eats irregularly with wide variations in how much
- Has unexplained constipation or diarrhea
- Has fainting episodes or frequent lightheadedness

Possible mental health diagnoses within this symptom cluster include:

- Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) (p62)
- Eating Disorders (p70)

A child with the symptoms listed above could also have a medical problem related to eating. Talk to your child's pediatrician about your child's symptoms.