Eating disorders: GP information sheet

Eating disorders involve a difficult relationship with food, eating, exercise or body image. They can affect people of any age, gender, culture or body size, and they are never a choice. Support is available.

About this sheet. We have written this sheet as psychologists, in the hope that GPs may find some of it useful. It offers general information only and is not a clinical tool.

How it may show up in everyday life

Some people, or the people close to them, may notice things like these. They can look quite different from one person to the next.

Thoughts about food

- Food might take up a lot of thinking time
- Rules around eating may feel important
- Meals could bring worry

Body image

- Feelings about the body might be strongly linked to self worth
- Comments about appearance may sting
- Mirrors or photos could feel difficult

Eating with others

- Shared meals might feel uncomfortable
- Social plans around food may be avoided
- Eating alone could feel easier

Exercise

- Exercise might feel driven rather than enjoyable
- Rest days could feel hard
- Movement may be linked to food

For young people

- Families might notice changes around mealtimes
- Growth or energy may change
- School friends may notice withdrawal

For adults

- Experiences might be hidden for a long time
- Busy lives may mask changes
- Feelings could shift during life transitions

What the person might be bringing

People may feel ambivalent, ashamed or frightened about talking about food and their body. Some may come with family members who are worried, while others might come alone.

A warm, curious conversation may help it feel safer to talk. Feeling heard can be a meaningful first step.

What GPs already do well

Opening gently

GPs are often the first person someone feels able to talk to. A gentle opening can help people share things they may not have said out loud before.

Listening to the story

GPs often know the person, and sometimes their family, over many years. That wider view of someone's life can be very valuable.

A steady point of contact

As people explore their options, the GP can remain a familiar, steady presence, working alongside other professionals.

Seeing the whole person

GPs often hold the bigger picture of someone's physical and emotional wellbeing, which is especially valuable here.

What psychology may offer

Understanding

- Time to make sense of experiences
- Exploring the relationship with food and body
- Recognising strengths as well as challenges
- A safe, non judgemental space

Practical and family support

- Approaches focused on eating and body image
- Support for parents, carers and families
- Working alongside dietitians
- Working alongside the GP and other professionals

Everyday things some people find helpful

These are simply possibilities. What helps one person may not suit another.

- Regular, flexible meals
- Kind, neutral language about bodies
- Shared meals in a relaxed setting
- Stepping back from unhelpful social media
- Movement for enjoyment
- Connecting with support organisations

Trusted Australian resources

Butterfly Foundation butterfly.org.au

National Eating Disorders Collaboration nedc.com.au

InsideOut Institute insideoutinstitute.org.au

Referring to Strategic Psychology

Our psychologists work with children, adolescents and adults. If a client would like to see one of our team, they can call us on 02 6262 6157 or visit strategicpsychology.com.au. Medicare rebates may be available with a GP referral.

This sheet offers general information for GPs to consider. It does not replace clinical judgement.