

Eating Disorder Prevention for Medical Providers

As a medical professional, you play an integral role in the detection and treatment of eating disorders in your patients. Unfortunately, most people affected by eating disorders withhold this important information from their doctors due to embarrassment, fear of being judged, not wanting to address it, or simply not realizing the severity of their condition. Thus, it is imperative that medical professionals, such as pediatricians, gynecologists, dentists, and endocrinologists, feel comfortable addressing this serious issue with their patients.

The following information is designed to help you understand what warning signs to look for in patients who may be affected by an eating disorder, what questions to ask your patients if you suspect an eating disorder, and to whom to refer your patients for high-quality, specialized care.

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS: The first step in helping your patients affected by eating disorders is to know the warning signs. Consider information from many sources, including your observations of the patient, reports from the patient and/or loved ones, as well as medical symptoms/complications.

Common Observable Signs

- Consistent fluctuations in weight at each appointment (e.g., 130 pounds then 145 pounds then 120 pounds)
- Significantly underweight or overweight, not accounted for by medical complications
- Swollen glands around the cheek and jaw bone due to self-induced vomiting
- Scar tissue on the tops of fingers due to acid from self-induced vomiting
- Tooth enamel damage and discoloration due to acid from self-induced vomiting
- Esophageal damage or inflammation
- Dry and brittle hair, nails, and skin
- Lanugo (fine baby hair) around the scalp
- Wearing clothes that are too big and baggy
- Extremities and limbs that are colder than might be expected based on room temperature
- Sudden changes in diet, such as cutting out meat, carbohydrates, sugar, or white flour
- Parent, spouse, or loved one reports that patient's weight has dramatically changed

Common Medical Complications

- Irregular or absent menses (amenorrhea)
- Dehydration and electrolyte imbalance
- Heart muscle damage
- Irregular heartbeat
- Low blood pressure
- Muscle paralysis
- Kidney damage or failure
- Convulsions, seizures
- Liver damage or failure
- Osteopenia or osteoporosis
- Unexplained stomach pains
- Fertility problems
- Edema
- Sore throat
- Esophageal damage
- Acid reflux
- Gastrointestinal damage (e.g., bloating, constipation, diarrhea)
- Failure to gain weight when otherwise indicated
- Dizziness and fainting

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Where lasting change is possible

ASK QUESTIONS: If a patient presents with some combination of the aforementioned warning signs, the second step is to ask questions. Don't be shy to inquire about how they feel about their bodies and food; most people affected by eating disorders report feeling relieved when someone finally notices and talks to them about it. Questions to consider asking include, but are not limited to:

- How do you feel about your body?
- Have you ever participated in any behaviors to control your weight?
- Have you ever taken any medications to control your weight?
- Do you feel comfortable eating in social situations, such as school, work, family, etc.?
- Is your menstrual cycle regular?
- Have you ever been teased or received negative comments about your body?
- Have you recently changed your diet (become a vegetarian, vegan, or cut out food groups)?
- How often and for how long do you exercise? What happens if you miss a workout?
- Do you find yourself thinking about food and/or your body most of the day?

KNOW HOW TO RESPOND: As you ask these questions, it is important to know how to respond to the patient in a way that is supportive, caring, and judgment-free. During your discussion with the patient, try to follow these four guidelines:

- All too often, people affected by eating disorders fear that others will think less of them once their eating disorder is exposed, so creating a warm, safe environment in which they can talk about their struggles with you is imperative to dispelling the secrecy surrounding their disorder.
- Continue to ask questions; it is very unlikely that the patient will offer details without your prompting.
- Provide education on the relationship between the eating disorder behaviors and current physical symptoms.
- At the end of the discussion, thank your patient for being brave enough to share this very personal information with you. Convey your genuine concern for their well-being, and reassure them that you will provide support in getting the proper care they deserve to fully recover.

PROVIDE REFERRALS: Lastly, if it seems as though your patient is affected by an eating disorder, provide referrals to specialists who are qualified to treat these deadly illnesses.

- Like many diseases, eating disorders require specialized, multi-faceted care from a team of skilled professionals.
- Depending on the severity of the eating disorder, the treatment team will likely include some combination of the following professionals: psychotherapist, dietitian, psychiatrist, family and/or couple therapist, group therapist, and various medical professionals (including you, the referring physician).
- If your patient is hesitant to seek help, encourage him/her to schedule a consultation just to learn about treatment options.

CONSULTATION AND EDUCATION: The treatment specialists at A New Beginning are here to support you in your efforts to detect and address eating disorders within your patient population. Towards this goal, A New Beginning has recently implemented a "community education" service to help educate and support physicians in this most-important area. If interested, one of our clinical therapists will meet with you and/or your staff to provide helpful information regarding the detection, treatment, and resources available to help patients with eating disorders. Additionally, our team of highly skilled clinicians are ready to serve your patients with compassion, skill, and commitment. We welcome the opportunity to consult with prospective clients who may be interested in pursuing treatment, and together we will create an individualized treatment plan that will set them on the path of recovery. At A New Beginning, we wholeheartedly believe that full recovery is possible!