

friends” or “I don’t feel well”.); excessive exercise; if parents suspect the young person is vomiting regularly, or using laxatives regularly.

Parents who think their child may have a problem, should ask a doctor, school counsellor or community health centre for advice. The Transcultural Mental Health Centre may also be able to help parents contact a health professional who speaks their language (ring (02) 9840 3800 or Freecall 1800 648 911 for people in country areas.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.



English
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Understanding Eating Disorders

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DEPARTMENT

Eighteen year old * Mia is slim enough to wear size eight clothes, but she complains that she's too fat. She loves cooking for other people, but hardly eats any food herself - she always say she's not hungry or she's just eaten. Meanwhile, 15-year-old * Vera is always dieting, often skipping breakfast and lunch to try and lose weight. This makes her so hungry that by the afternoon she can't stop eating. Then she feels so guilty for eating so much and so worried about gaining weight as a result that she makes herself vomit.

Mia and Vera both have eating disorders which are potentially serious and can even be fatal. Mia has anorexia nervosa, which means she's obsessed with controlling the amount of food she eats. Because she eats so little and exercises so much, she's very underweight - this has affected the hormone levels in her body, making her periods stop. Anorexia affects both sexes, but is more common in teenage girls. Occasionally it affects girls as young as eight.

While girls with anorexia are often very thin, girls with bulimia, like Vera, may still be a normal weight, while others may have dramatic weight changes. They alternate periods of starvation with periods of bingeing on food. These "binges" are usually followed by an attempt to get rid of the food either by vomiting, taking laxatives or frantic exercise.

The causes of eating disorders are very complex. Part of the problem is that in western countries like Australia, television, films and magazines give the impression that the "ideal" woman is very slim. Many girls feel they must also be very slim to fit this "perfect" image. At the same time, adolescence is an age when girls often become very conscious of their weight and their looks. It's also an age when it's normal for girls to gain weight - it's part of the process of becoming a woman. Some girls also gain weight for other reasons. They may eat too much "junk" food and do less exercise - it's common for

girls to lose interest in sport and games at this age. All these factors work together to pressure some girls into desperate attempts to lose weight.

That's part of the story. But what doctors don't fully understand is what makes some girls more likely to develop eating disorders than others. Why is it that some girls can see images of "perfect" women on television and in magazines, yet not feel they must starve themselves? Other factors that may help cause eating disorders include family conflicts or a feeling that love from family and friends depends on doing very well at school or work. People with eating disorders often have a low opinion of themselves. They may feel they have little control over their lives - being able to change their bodies may give them a sense of control.

Because children who become anxious about their weight may develop eating disorders, it's important for their family not to make them over-conscious about their size by making critical or teasing remarks, or by suggesting they diet or join a weight control program, for instance. If girls refuse food at home, complaining that food is too fatty, for example, it's good for parents to listen to them and talk about what foods they prefer. If teenagers are involved in making these kinds of decisions - rather than having them made for them - they're more likely to co-operate. (Of course, it's important that their food choices are a balance of healthy foods such as bread, pasta, rice and other grains, vegetables, fruit, legumes, moderate amounts of low fat dairy products, lean meat, poultry and fish).

Although the physical effects of anorexia and bulimia can be very serious, they aren't usually permanent, providing the problem is treated early enough. Possible signs that someone may have an eating disorder include: losing a lot of weight, not eating (and making excuses like "I've just eaten with my