Eating disorders

Initial assessment in primary care

**Take history**

**Ask about:**
- Changes in eating
- Food eaten yesterday
- Vomiting
- Exercise
- Repeated weighing or body checking
- Preoccupation with weight and shape
- Are they trying to lose weight?
- If so, what would be their ideal weight?
- Use of diet pills and laxatives
- Stopping prescribed medicines
- Suppressing hunger with caffeine, smoking, or excessive water drinking

Developing a therapeutic relationship is important:

Thank you for being brave enough to tell me about this

Be honest about the limits of confidentiality:

Can we think together about letting your parents know?

**Assess mental health and social functioning**

- Suicidal ideation/plans
- Anxiety
- Depression
- School
- Current stressors
- Family
- Peers
- Abuse

**Examine for physiological consequences**

**General physical appearance**

- Signs of malnourishment
- May appear well
- Check hair and teeth
- Dehydration

**Cardiovascular**

- Slow pulse
- Delayed capillary refill
- Postural tachycardia
- Decreased core temperature
- Low blood pressure

**Musculoskeletal**

- Muscle weakness
- Back or bone pain
- Sit/squat test fail

**Gastrointestinal**

- Gastric dilation

**Height and weight**

- May be less than minimally expected
- Less than 75% weight for height
- May be normal or increased

**Skin**

- Pressure sores
- Russel’s sign

**Consider further investigations**  

look for signs of eating disorder or differential diagnoses

**Full blood count**

- Anaemia
- Thrombocytopaenia
- Neutropenia
- ESR
- If significant

**Bone profile**

- Hypophosphataemia
- Low calcium, magnesium, or phosphate

**Blood glucose**

- Hypoglycaemia

**Urea and electrolytes**

- Hyponatraemia
- Dehydration
- Hypokalaemia
- Electrolyte disturbance

**ESR**

- Possible organic cause
- Bacterial infection

**ECG†**

- Cardiac arrhythmia
- >450 ms

**Thyroid function tests**

- Hyperthyroidism

**Management and referral**

If you think they have an eating disorder, consider referral to a specialist child and adolescent eating disorder team. Most young people with eating disorders can be treated as outpatients.

Signs and symptoms marked with △ may require emergency treatment.

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