

# Warning Signs and Symptoms

by Cherie R Monarch

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## Food Behaviors:

- An obsession with cooking and baking, but no participation in eating items.
- Eating in ritualistic manners.
- Constant obsession with eating only “healthy” – fruits, vegetables etc
- Eliminating food groups
- Excessive water loading
- Has unusual behaviors around food (organizing food, cutting food into small pieces, always finding something wrong with food, pushing food around the plate)
- Eating only tiny portions of food
- Will eat only a few “safe” foods
- Drastically reduces or completely eliminates fat intake
- Adherence to increasingly strict diets, regardless of weight
- Constantly talking about calories
- Reads food labels religiously
- Has anxiety around food or in the grocery store
- Unable to make food decisions or has difficulty ordering at a restaurant
- Refuses to eat birthday cake or desserts at times that would be appropriate
- Large amounts of food disappearing – secretive eating
- Hiding food – under bed, in drawers, etc
- Chews a lot of gum or drinks large amounts of coffee, diet soda, or calorie-free beverages
- Chewing mouthfuls of food, but spits them out before swallowing
- Always has an excuse not to eat - not hungry, already ate, feeling ill, running late, etc.
- Refusing to eat foods that they previously ate and enjoyed.
- Watches food shows or visits food websites constantly

## Physical signs:

- Excessive weight loss – losing a significant amount of weight in short period of time
- Underweight, even emaciated appearance with protruding bones or a sunken appearance to the face
- However – it should be noted that you do NOT have to be underweight or have weight loss in order to have an eating disorder
- Baby fine hair covering face and other areas of the body (lanugo)
- Cuts or scarring on the top of hands.
- Fingernails or toenails turning blue.
- Tooth decay, Damaged gums
- Complaints of being cold
- Absence of 3 consecutive menstrual cycles in post-menarcheal females
- Swollen glands in throat, Puffiness in the cheeks.
- Constant sore throat
- Hair loss, paleness, and dizziness
- Broken blood vessels in the eyes
- Abnormal bowel functions

- Sores in the throat and mouth

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#### Behaviors:

- Binging and purging
- Feelings of guilt after eating
- Visits to the bathroom after meals
- Running water to cover sounds of purging
- Disgust and shame after overeating
- Abuse of laxatives, diet pills and/or diuretics
- Very poor self-esteem
- Feels like he/she has no control over food
- May start self-harming

#### Physical appearance and body image behaviors:

- Constant FAT talk
- Constant body comparison with others
- Obsession with weight, body size, shape, or specific aspects of their appearance
- Wearing loose or multiple layers of clothing
- Obsesses about clothing size
- Constantly weighs themselves – often multiple times a day
- Obsession with size of body parts, i.e., thighs, stomach, buttocks, etc.
- Constantly "body checks" (looks at their body in the mirror or feels their body with their hands)

#### Social behaviors:

- Avoiding meals are situations where food may be present
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Avoids eating in public or in front of others
- No longer attends social engagements
- Complains they do not have any friends
- Person tries to control what and where the family eats
- Anorexics tend to be rigidly controlling in all aspects of life
- Bulimics may have problems with lack of impulse control that can lead to rash and regrettable decisions about sex, money, stealing, commitments, careers, and all forms of social risk taking.

#### Exercise Behaviors:

- Excessive and compulsive exercise regimes
- Will forgo social engagements to exercise
- Exercising in the middle of the night
- Intensification of exercise regimes

#### Mental Functioning:

- Intense and dramatic mood swings
- Difficulty focusing/studying
- Drop in grades – difficulty maintaining grades
- Memory loss/Unable to retain information
- Throws tantrums – emotionally unbalanced
- Loses the ability to think logically, evaluate reality objectively

- Associated mental disorders: depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, substance abuse

Other Behaviors: Eating disorders often occur with other problems

- Alcohol abuse
- Abuse of laxatives and diuretics (water pills)
- Abuse of prescription medications (including insulin, Ritalin, etc)
- Abuse of recreational drugs (speed, cocaine, steroids)
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Threats of suicide or suicide attempts
- Cutting, burning, hair pulling or other self-harm behaviors
- Rage attacks
- Homicidal threats or attempts
- Stealing and other criminal acts
- Any other behaviors that can logically be expected to bring harm to self or others.

The warning signs for eating disorders can vary from sufferer to sufferer. Some are the same, some are vastly different. Of course there is the big and usually most obvious sign which is weight-loss. Even 5% weight loss in a child/adolescent is a warning sign and should be closely monitored and investigated. It is truly unbelievable how often weight-loss goes unmonitored and unquestioned in an adolescent. But it should also be noted that not all loved ones suffering with an eating disorder have weight-loss or a change in weight. So an eating disorder should not be dismissed just because there has not been dramatic weight loss.

> The big thing I encourage parents to watch for is "**change**". Change in diet, eating habits/patterns, eating rituals, physical appearance, behaviors, mental thoughts/functioning, social interaction, etc. For diet, it could be things such as elimination of food groups...A sudden desire to be vegan, vegetarian, a focus on eating fruits and vegetables, elimination of dairy from the diet, refusal to eat condiments, change in caloric intake, etc. A change in eating habits/patterns can include sudden skipping of meals, refusing to eat after a certain time in the evening, consuming large amounts of vegetables, etc. Change or adoption of eating rituals can include cutting food in small pieces, always finding something wrong with the food, eating only tiny portions of food, only being able to eat with certain plates or dinnerware, unable to make food decisions or has difficulty ordering at restaurants, will chew food but then spits it out before swallowing, watches food shows or visits food websites constantly, prepares elaborate meals/desserts but then refuses to eat them, constantly studying recipes, etc. Examples of changes physically are excessive weight loss, baby fine hair growing on face and other parts of the body, fingernails or toenails turning blue, cuts or scarring on the top of the hands, constant sore throat, paleness, hair loss, dizziness, broken blood vessels in the eyes, etc. Changes in behaviors include changes in bathroom habits such as visiting the bathroom after meals, spending tremendous amounts of time in the shower, running water while in the bathroom, constantly weighing themselves, disgust and shame after eating, self harming, excessive and compulsive exercise regimes, will forgo social engagements to exercise, exercise in the middle of the night, intensification of exercise regimes, etc. Changes in mental thoughts/functioning includes dramatic and intense mood swings, difficulty focusing/studying, memory loss/unable to retain information, tantrums-emotionally unbalanced, loses the ability to think logically & objectively, appearance of other

associated mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, OCD, substance abuse, etc. Changes in social interaction would include things like withdrawing from friends and family, avoiding eating in public or in front of others, no longer attends social engagements, isolates, complains they do not have any friends, avoiding situations where food may be present.

If your loved one is illustrating several of these signs or symptoms then it's very possible that they might be suffering with an eating disorder. Very important that you get your loved one evaluated by a physician and therapist that specializes in eating disorders as soon as possible. The earlier the diagnosis, intervention, and treatment, the greater the chance for recovery. Very important to hit eating disorders hard from the very beginning.