

Common Health Risks Associated with Eating Disorders in Adolescents

When an adolescent has an eating disorder, they may develop some symptoms that we need to look out for. Eating disorders can cause malnutrition, a condition that develops when someone does not get the amount of nutrition that they need to function properly. When the brain and body do not get enough nutrition, physical health and behavior can get worse.



What are the most common signs and symptoms of these health risks?

Low Heart Rate and Blood Pressure

Heart rate and blood pressure are vital signs that tell us a lot about health. They may become too low if someone's body does not have the nutrition or fluids it needs. Low blood pressure or heart rate can lead to feeling dizzy and possibly even passing out.

Changes in Skin and Body Temperature

When someone is not getting enough nutrition or fluid, their skin may become very dry or cracked. Often, the adolescent may have very cold hands and feet. They may also form fine hair on the sides of their face and back. This is because their body is at a lower temperature than normal and is making changes to itself to stay warm.

Delays in Puberty, Growth, Development

Slowed growth, with lower than potential adult final height, is one of the most common long-term symptoms of malnutrition. This means that your adolescent may not grow as tall as they should. They may have a later start to some of the changes that come with puberty. For example, adolescents assigned female at birth can have a change in their period pattern. This could mean starting their period at a later age than expected or having missed periods. This may affect their bone health in both the short and long term.

Effects on Bone Health

Half (50%) or more of the bone forms during the teenage years. When an adolescent is not getting enough nutrition, their body slows down some processes, including bone formation. This can result in low bone density and cause a higher fracture risk from any injury, even small ones. In more severe cases of eating disorders, adolescents may have a risk of developing a condition called osteoporosis (very weak bones).

Outpatient Eating Disorders Program, Behavioral Health Institute

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Effects on the Brain

Malnutrition causes a major impact on a youth's developing brain. Low nutrition in adolescents may lower brain functions, such as memory and control over emotions. This may affect how they interact with others (including family and friends) and how well they do in school. This is also why they often have high anxiety (feeling nervous) or may become angry more easily.

Imbalance in Electrolytes (such as sodium, magnesium, and potassium)

This is a serious condition we check for in both clinic and hospitalized adolescents who may be vomiting or have a lot of weight loss. If this condition is not treated, it may cause serious risks to their heart or kidneys. In the worst-case scenario, it could even lead to death.

Can these conditions get better?

Yes, these conditions can improve or reverse in adolescents. As long as they can get the care that they need as early as possible with a team that has special training in eating disorders. We are happy to provide that care here at the Children's Hospital Los Angeles in our Outpatient Eating Disorders Program (EDP).

Contact Us

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