



# Eating Disorders in Pregnancy

## A Guide for expectant parents and their families

For some people, body changes during pregnancy and the increased focus on weight and shape can result in a relapse of a previous eating disorder. Other expectant parents may develop an eating disorder for the first time.

### What is an eating disorder?

A person with an eating disorder experiences significant distress in relation to their body, weight, food or eating. This can lead them to try to control their food intake or exercise, or to feel as though they cannot control those things. This can take a toll on both their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

#### Warning signs

##### Physical

- Changes in weight (loss, gain, fluctuating)
- Fainting or dizziness
- Fatigue or lethargy
- Bloating or constipation
- Compromised immune system

##### Behavioural

- Repetitive dieting
- Obsessive behaviours around food, body shape, and weight
- Changes in food preferences
- Secretive behaviour around eating and/or exercise
- Avoidance of or changes in behaviour around social situations involving food
- Evidence of vomiting, misuse of laxatives, and/or appetite suppressants

##### Psychological

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and/or weight
- Low self-esteem and feelings of shame
- Body dissatisfaction or negative body image
- Difficulty concentrating
- Depression and anxiety
- Heightened sensitivity to comments or criticism

### How common are eating disorders in pregnancy?

It's estimated that the prevalence rate of eating disorders during pregnancy is around 7.5 per cent. Even more can experience body image concerns and disordered eating.

There's often considerable feelings of guilt and shame attached to this, which prevent people from seeking help.

### How does pregnancy affect eating disorders?

Research shows that often pregnancy results in improvements to eating patterns, and therefore this is a time when eating disorders improve for some expectant parents.

For some expectant parents, pregnancy may bring shifts in motivation or priorities, including a focus on the needs of the developing baby. However, this experience is not universal.

Some people who are pregnant will still experience disordered eating or an eating disorder. This doesn't mean that they do not care for their baby or that they cannot have a safe pregnancy. Non-judgemental help is available.



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### Eating disorders and mental health

Eating disorders have been associated with increased risk of anxiety and depression both during pregnancy and in the year following birth. There has also been an association between eating disorders and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) during pregnancy.

This is why your health team need to know how your mental health is tracking during your pregnancy and early parenting journey.

### How are eating disorders managed in pregnancy?

#### Non-medical treatments

A mental health professional can work with you to find the therapeutic approach that works for you. This might include Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Interpersonal Therapy or other approaches.

#### Medical treatments

Medical treatments focus on the treatment of anxiety and/or depression which commonly co-occur with eating disorders. Depending on how severe your symptoms are, you may also need to take medicine, usually a class of antidepressant called SSRIs, which are safe to use in pregnancy and when breastfeeding.

Usually it is recommended that both types of therapies (medical and non-medical) are provided for eating disorders if your symptoms are severe and/or impact upon your ability to function well from day-to-day.

As with all medications in pregnancy, it is important to speak with your health professional, and together weigh up the risks of the medication with the risks of untreated or not adequately treated eating disorders.

### Advice to help with eating disorders in pregnancy

There are helpful strategies and treatments to support people with eating disorders in pregnancy.

#### Education

Often called psychoeducation, this can support understanding of mental health experiences and offer tools that some people find helpful in managing distress"

Helpful resources like the free Ready to COPE guide provides timely, relevant information throughout pregnancy, birth, and the first year of parenthood. Ready to COPE also allows you to do self-checks to monitor your symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety throughout your pregnancy.

#### Talk to your health professional

It is important to let your health professional (e.g. GP) know about your experience of an eating disorder so that they can ensure you have the right supports in place including specific eating disorder care.



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People experiencing an eating disorder may have a higher risk of iron deficiencies during pregnancy or may miss out on key nutrients. Speak with your health professional about monitoring your levels, and you may ask to see a Credentialed Eating Disorder Dietitian for more advice on getting the nutrients that you and your baby need.

### Birth outcomes

As there can be a higher risk of obstetric complications amongst people with eating disorders, it is important to talk to your health professional as early as possible in pregnancy about your eating disorder history. This will allow your care providers to closely monitor the health of your baby throughout pregnancy.

### Self care

Self-care may include prioritising rest where possible, taking small steps to support nourishment, and finding moments of calm. Practices such as mindfulness or grounding can help some people manage stress or distress.

Eating nutritious foods and staying hydrated will help give your brain and body what they need to get you and your baby through pregnancy and early parenthood. When possible, choose fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and energy sources such as lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs, nuts, seeds and plant oils. Also, be flexible with your food and kind to yourself about the choices that you make – you are doing hard things and 'good enough' nutrition is good enough.

As pregnancy can involve additional considerations for people with eating disorders, it is helpful to talk with your health professional as early as possible about your eating disorder history. This supports informed, coordinated care for both you and your baby throughout pregnancy.

## Advice for family and friends

### Listen and reassure

- Be mindful that that a person with an eating disorder may not feel comfortable discussing how they feel. They may be wrestling with the thoughts of the eating disorder and guilt associated with their eating disorder behaviour. This may lead them to be more agitated in pregnancy.
- Encourage open discussion of symptoms relating to their eating disorder, or depression and anxiety.
- Reassure them that help and support is available.

### Provide information

- Give quality information about eating disorders in pregnancy, such as this fact sheet.
- Give details of helplines if the person is feeling distressed and needs support.
- Offer information to their partner/others.

### Direct to care and support

- Encourage the person to talk to their GP or other health professional.
- Encourage them to identify and draw on possible supports and services that may be available for practical and/or emotional support.
- If there are concerns about immediate safety, support can also be accessed through a GP, local hospital, or emergency services.



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### Advice for expectant parents and their families

#### Ready to COPE Guide

Sign up to receive free weekly information about emotional and mental health throughout your pregnancy and first year with a new baby, at [readytcope.org.au](https://readytcope.org.au)

#### Inside Out Clinic for Eating Disorders

The comprehensive [Inside Out eClinic website](https://eclinic.insideoutinstitute.org.au) provides access to a range of evidence-based self-help tools and resources and online therapies. - [eclinic.insideoutinstitute.org.au](https://eclinic.insideoutinstitute.org.au)

#### Talk to someone

Speak with a specialist counsellor on the PANDA helpline on [1300 726 306](tel:1300726306) (Monday to Saturday 9.00am – 7.30pm AEST/AEDT)

Access free, confidential support via the [Butterfly National Helpline](https://butterfly.org.au/get-support/helpline/) on [1800 334 673](tel:1800334673) or visit their website: [butterfly.org.au/get-support/helpline/](https://butterfly.org.au/get-support/helpline/)

#### Find a service

To find out about other perinatal mental health treatment and support services, visit the COPE Directory at [directory.cope.org.au](https://directory.cope.org.au) or call the ForWhen Helpline on [1300 24 23 22](tel:1300242322) to speak with a local navigator (9.00 am – 4.30pm Monday – Friday).

Find a GP, mental health professional and dietitian credentialed in eating disorders via [connect-ed: connected.anzaed.org.au](https://connect-ed.connected.anzaed.org.au)

#### For more information

More information about emotional and mental health during pregnancy can be found at [cope.org.au](https://cope.org.au)

Visit the [Eating Disorders Families Australia](https://edfa.org.au) website: [edfa.org.au](https://edfa.org.au)

Visit the [National Eating Disorders Collaboration](https://nedc.com.au) website: [nedc.com.au](https://nedc.com.au)