



Eating Disorders in Early Parenthood

A Guide for new parents and their families

For some parents, body changes and the increased focus on weight and shape after having a baby can result in a relapse of a previous eating disorder. Other new mothers or parents may develop an eating disorder.

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 after having a baby?

Experiences of eating disorders during and after pregnancy vary. While some people notice changes in symptoms during pregnancy, the postnatal period can be particularly challenging, and may be associated with increased distress or a return of eating disorder behaviour.

How does early parenthood affect eating disorders?

Changes in body image can be challenging for people with a history of eating disorders.

Whilst pregnancy may lead to improvements in eating disorder behaviours, in the months following birth, parents are more likely to report being unhappy with their body shape and weight. This can happen to people of all body shapes and sizes.

Higher levels of distress are also reported by some people in the months following birth. This can be regarding the changes to their body from pre-pregnancy, missing their pregnancy identity, the feeling of lost ownership, agency or control of your body, and/or general challenges with early parenthood. These factors can all result in increased risk of relapse at this time.



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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.

This is why it is important that your health team know your eating disorder experience and how your mental health is tracking during your pregnancy and early parenting journey.

How are eating disorders managed in early parenthood?

Non-medical treatments

Talking therapies can be very helpful for some people in managing eating disorders and related mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression.

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

Medicines such as a class of antidepressants known as SSRIs which are safe to use during breastfeeding, may be helpful to manage depression or anxiety that you may be experiencing alongside the eating disorder. This can make it easier to focus on therapy.

Some medications are approved in Australia for the treatment of Binge Eating Disorder but should only be prescribed in certain circumstances.

As with all medications, 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 - particularly if you are breastfeeding.

Advice to help with eating disorders in early parenthood

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

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 provide timely, relevant information throughout your first year of parenthood.

Ready to COPE offers optional self-check-ins that can help some parents reflect on how they are feeling during the first year of parenthood.



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Talk to your health professional

It is helpful to let your health professional know about your history with eating disorders, so they can better understand your needs and work with you to provide appropriate support and reassurance.

Feeding

Research has indicated that parents with current or a history of eating disorders may need additional support with feeding the baby and eating.

A Child and Family Nurse or Lactation Consultant may be able to assist with specific feeding challenges, including fuelling your own body or managing specific difficulties with body positioning. A Credentialed Eating Disorder Clinician can provide additional support when these challenges bring up body image concerns or worries about food.

Self care

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.

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 early parenthood.
- 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 early parenthood, such as this fact sheet.
- Give details of helplines if the person is feeling distressed and needs support.
- Offer information to their partner/others.

Help access 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

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

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/

Find a service

To find out about other perinatal mental health treatment and support services, visit the COPE Directory at 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](https://connect-ed.connected.anzaed.org.au): connected.anzaed.org.au

For more information

More information about emotional and mental health during pregnancy can be found at cope.org.au

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

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