

Pandemic paves way for blowout in eating disorders, and need for more research and interventions

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As the COVID-19 pandemic underpins a rise in mental health problems globally, experts are raising a red flag on 'starkly lower' government

funding for research and delivery of effective eating disorder interventions, particularly among children and young adults.

Compared to mental disorders of comparable or clinical impairment, [government funding](#) for eating disorders is historically "starkly lower," the international experts say in a new article in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry.

For example, [research funding](#) in Australia equates to \$1.10 per individual with an [eating disorder](#) (ED) compared to \$32.62 and \$67.36 per person with autism or schizophrenia.

The COVID 19 pandemic has generated a marked increase in presentations of both new and relapsing eating disorders, and in the level of acuity and severity of these presentations.

"Rising service demand among [young people](#) during the pandemic needs to be matched by research to evaluate innovative interventions and to track the long-term course of EDs, which commonly last more than 10 years, and which require age-based interventions Flinders University Associate Professor of Psychiatry Stephen Allison .

Under-resourcing research and the rollout of evidence-based eating disorder interventions compared to other [mental disorders](#) will substantially impact on future treatment options for children, young people and adults with ED, the article says.

With more than 80% of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa commencing in youth, the optimal age for [early intervention](#) is in the first three years from the median age for onset of 16 years old, research shows.

UK research from the "First Episode Rapid Early Intervention for EDs'

service model for young people aged 16-25 is evaluating eating disorder presentations during the pandemic in light of mental health pressure from social isolation from lockdown, increased screen time and excessive social media use, and parental stress.

King's College London Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience Professor Ulrike Schmidt says one more issue to be investigated would be the compounding effect on EDs with regular pandemic public health messages about avoiding obesity during lockdown.

"While the pandemic sheds light on the acute needs of young people with EDs, we need commensurate funding to cope with rising demand and to support delivery of expanded services," Professor Schmidt says, citing the UK's flagship eating disorders program which will track ED conditions' illness and recovery trajectories to inform personalized prevention and early intervention for young people.

"We know that it's crucial to adapt and evaluate appropriate treatments to cope with rising demand," says another author on the ANZJP article, Matthew Flinders Distinguished Professor of Psychology Tracey Wade,

Professor Wade, who is research director of South Australia's Statewide Eating Disorders Service, says several government, philanthropic and community groups are working hard to meet rising demands—particularly during the pandemic period.

"Setting a youth-focused research agenda for eating [disorders](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic is vital to gear up for enough face-to-face, online and other interventions to manage this ongoing issue," says Professor Wade, a director of the Blackbird Initiative and Órama Institute for Mental Health and Well-Being at Flinders University.

More information: Stephen Allison et al, Setting a youth-focused research agenda for eating disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00048674211054743](https://doi.org/10.1177/00048674211054743)

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