

Does your loved one have an eating disorder? Look for these 7 signs

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Roughly 30 million Americans have an [eating disorder](#) in their lifetime,

and calls to a nationwide support group have surged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between March 2020 and October 2021, the National Eating Disorders Association ([NEDA](#)) recorded a 58% increase in calls, texts and emails seeking help. Behind [opioid addiction](#), [eating disorders](#) have the second highest risk of death of any mental illness—claiming about 10,200 lives a year in the United States.

But would you know how to recognize if you or someone you love needs help? Most people who have an eating disorder never receive treatment, according to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health.

And once someone begins displaying the more common characteristics of an eating disorder such as [anorexia](#) or [bulimia](#), experts consider the condition to be fairly advanced.

The longer an eating disorder lingers, the harder it is to get rid of it. And those people have higher rates of relapse and worsening physical and mental health side effects.

But there's hope for people with disordered eating or [body image](#) issues, if their symptoms are caught and treated early on.

Major warning signs include weight concerns; anxiety around exercise and meal preparation; a controlling attitude around food; odd behaviors around mealtime; and negative moods or [low energy](#), according to NEDA.

Here's what to watch for:

Weight—People with eating [disorders](#) may express concern about their shape, weight, or a desire to look different. They may talk a lot about

food, "clean" eating or dieting, or they may actively be on a diet.

Exercise—They may follow an [exercise regimen](#) without increasing their [caloric intake](#) and become anxious, upset or emotional if unable to [exercise](#).

Meal prep—While an individual may be unusually interested in cooking, they won't actually eat what they prepare. They may eat meals that are different or "safer" than what the family is eating.

Control over food — They may become irrationally upset when they're unable to control a situation involving food—for example, a sudden change in dinner plans or inability to order a food they planned to get.

Odd behavior — They may exhibit odd behaviors such as going to the bathroom frequently during the meal, or avoiding eating around other people. They may go through rituals, such as cutting their food into tiny pieces or eating [food](#) items in a particular order.

Mood—They may appear more depressed, anxious or irritable than normal.

Energy—If they're not eating much, they're apt to be low energy, or even low in every sense of the word. They may seem disinterested in things they used to love, or may appear "down" all the time. Others may exhibit the opposite reaction, taking on all sorts of responsibilities and activities, becoming over-involved and giving 100% all the time. They may become obsessed with perfectionism.

If you have a loved one who appears to be struggling with an [eating disorder](#), the best thing you can do to help is to start the conversation around it. Gently express your concerns, and remind them that you're around to talk and help them through it. Find resources and talk to a

physician or therapist. Mostly important, let them know that you love them.

More information: The National Eating Disorder Association has a helpline for those who are [struggling with body image or eating issues](#).

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