

New report highlights increase in number of children and young people with eating disorders

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One in five children and young people have a probable mental health condition, according to The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 report. The report also reveals a significant rise

in those being diagnosed with eating disorders, including a 10% increase among young men and women aged 17–19.

The [report](#) is a follow on from the 2017 survey, which six years ago reported an upswing in anxiety, depression and [self-harm](#) among young women.

Among other key findings were:

- After a rise in prevalence between 2017 and 2020, rates of probable [mental disorder](#) remained stable in all age groups between 2022 and 2023.
- Among 8 to 16 year olds, rates of probable mental disorder were similar for boys and girls, while for 17 to 25 year olds, rates were twice as high for [young women](#) than young men.
- More than one in four [children](#) aged 8 to 16 years (26.8%) with a probable mental disorder had a parent who could not afford for their child to take part in activities outside school or college, compared with one in 10 (10.3%) of those unlikely to have a mental disorder.
- 17 to 25 year olds with a probable mental disorder were three times more likely to not be able to afford to take part in activities such as sports, days out, or socializing with friends, compared with those unlikely to have a mental disorder (26.1% compared with 8.3%).
- Children aged 11 to 16 years with a probable mental disorder were five times more likely than those unlikely to have a mental disorder to have been bullied in person (36.9% compared with 7.6%). They were also more likely to have been bullied online (10.8% compared with 2.6%).

Professor Tamsin Ford, Head of Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge and one of the research leads for the new Cambridge

Children's Hospital, was one of the report's authors. She said, "These figures confirm that the huge increase in referrals to clinics for eating disorder services is not just the result of more children and young people seeking help, it's a sign of more children and young people needing help. There is no single silver bullet to fixing this problem. All services working with children must pull together."

While not every young person with an eating disorder will require inpatient care, for those that do Professor Ford says Cambridge Children's Hospital, with its vision of integrated mental and physical [health](#) care will vastly improve treatment and outcomes.

"These are conditions to be taken very seriously. The benefit of having integrated pediatric physical and mental health care for children and young people diagnosed with eating disorders is huge," said Professor Ford.

"If your condition is that severe, you need access to blood tests and the acute medical care that being on an inpatient acute pediatric ward gives you, but at the same time you need the therapeutic environment and support that you would get in a mental health ward.

"What Cambridge Children's Hospital will do is provide both in the same place as opposed to children having to be transferred between locations and only being able to access one part of their care that they need at any one time."

As the first specialist children's hospital for the East of England, Cambridge Children's Hospital will care for children, young people and their families from Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. Every child will be treated for their mental and physical health, with an additional focus on family well-being and support.

Professor Ford said mental health problems in the teenage and emerging adult years can massively impact a young person's future trajectory in terms of education, health, employment, and social skills. She believes Cambridge Children's Hospital vision of integrated care will help children and [young people](#) recover more quickly.

"What we hope is that treating mental and [physical health](#) together—a 'whole child' approach—will allow us to get children better quicker and get them back to their homes and back attending school, which again will help their ongoing recovery. Children should be in hospital for the shortest possible time."

The [report](#) was commissioned by NHS England and carried out by the National Center for Social Research, the Office for National Statistics and the Universities of Cambridge and Exeter.

Living with an eating disorder

Summer (name changed), who was diagnosed with an eating disorder during her teens, was cared for in the community before being admitted to an inpatient ward. She says being able to have a clinician treat you from your bedside, rather than being transferred to a [hospital](#), could make a huge difference.

"The physical consequences [of eating [disorders](#)] can be huge," said Summer, who grew up in Essex. "Your vital signs can get dangerously low and long term you can get difficulties, like osteoporosis."

"Self-harming can be quite common in some mental health units and the need to leave for treatment somewhere else can be traumatizing for the young person being moved and the other patients who might witness it."

Summer, who says challenges at home as well as pressure from social

media contributed to her becoming ill, added, "It can be a shock being admitted as an inpatient, particularly if you feel you're still functioning well in school or work. It can be difficult to recognize how sick you are."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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