



# Eating Disorders in Children



*Image 1: Eating disorders affect about 5% of the total population.*

*Image Source: Freepik*

## Abstract

Eating disorders are complex mental health conditions that affect all individuals, regardless of their age and gender. Although the condition is easy to diagnose in adults, that might not be the case in children. Diagnosing eating disorders among children comes with challenges, as children are often picky eaters. Understanding eating disorders in children is crucial for healthcare professionals, parents, and teachers to prevent their long-term health consequences. This article attempts to explore the eating disorders prevalent among children.





## What Are Eating Disorders?

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines eating disorders as complex behavioral conditions that can affect an individual in a physical, psychological, and social domain. According to the APA, the condition affects about 5% of the total population, mainly affecting adolescents, young adults, and children. As per the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), the general symptoms and warning signs of eating disorders can be broadly categorized as emotional and behavioral signs, and physical signs, such as:

### Emotional or Behavioral Warning Signs

- Reduced portion sizes,
- Skipping meals,
- Overconsciousness while eating and picking meals,
- Picky eating,
- Body image consciousness,
- Frequent dieting,
- Overconsciousness during public meals, and
- Reluctant eating.

### Physical Warning Signs

- Fluctuating body weight,
- Fainting or dizziness,
- Dehydration,
- Dry skin, hair, and nails,
- Dental caries, decay, and
- Menstrual irregularities in women.

## What Are the Factors Contributing to Eating Disorders?

Although the underlying causes and mechanisms of eating disorders are still understudied, a growing body of research suggests that the following reasons might be the general driving factors:

- Psychological factors,
- Environmental factors,
- Genetics,
- Sociocultural factors, and
- Medical factors.





## How to Spot Eating Disorders in Children?

Spotting eating disorders in children can be quite challenging and confusing, as children tend to be picky eaters or are reluctant to eat certain foods. But according to a growing body of literature, eating disorders in children could be recognized by warning signs such as:

- Fear of eating,
- Delay in puberty,
- Picky eating,
- Changes in eating habits, including neglecting food or excessive food consumption,
- Displaying distorted body perception,
- Social withdrawal or isolation,
- Excessive exercising,
- Drastic changes in body weight, or growth percentiles,
- Irritability, and
- Elevated mood swings, anxiety, or depression.



*Image 2: Eating disorders can inflict severe consequences on the growth and development of children.*

*Image Source: Freepik.*





# What Are the Different Types of Eating Disorders in Children?

Extensive research suggests that numerous eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), affect children and adolescents with varying degrees of symptoms and signs. According to an article published in the *European Journal of Dentistry*, in 2021, these conditions can inflict severe consequences on the growth and development of children, such as periodontal diseases, dental caries, malnutrition, nutrition deficiencies, and obesity. Apart from the damage to physical health, eating disorders can also affect children's mental health, causing conditions including obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), depression, and anxiety, as per the study published in the *"International Journal of Eating Disorders"* in 2020.

- **Anorexia Nervosa (AN)**

According to an *article* published in the *"International Journal of Eating Disorders,"* in 2018, children suffering from anorexia struggle with the fear of gaining weight or having a distorted body image. Furthermore, the study states that these children are usually reluctant to maintain a healthy body weight, leading to food reluctance and refusal. A *2023 article* published in the *Advances in Psychiatry and Neurology* journal states that apart from self-restricting from food, children suffering from anorexia nervosa may also engage in excessive exercise or other physical activities that aid in weight loss as they consider themselves overweight despite being underweight.

- **Bulimia Nervosa**

In a recent article published in the journal *Advances in Psychiatry and Neurology*, children suffering from bulimia nervosa engage in episodes of binge eating followed by purging behaviors, including vomiting or excessive exercise, to compensate for the consumption of excess calories. The article further mentions that purging behaviors are often accompanied by the use of laxatives.

- **Binge Eating Disorder**

As per a study published in *Advances in Psychiatry and Neurology* in 2023, children struggling with binge eating disorder engage in frequent episodes of excessive food intake, also referred to as "binge eating." Furthermore, the article highlights that binge eating disorders are driven by a feeling of lack of control over food consumption. But unlike bulimia nervosa, no purging behaviors are involved in this particular condition.







- **Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)**

The APA describes Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) as an eating disorder associated with picky eating or avoidance or reluctance to consume certain foods or food groups. According to the APA, this reluctance may lead to nutritional deficiencies or impair the growth and development of children. As per a paper published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* in 2022, ARFID is not associated with body image issues or body weight; rather, it is driven by a lack of interest in eating. The *latest article* published in the journal *University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS)* suggests that children with ARFID experience sensory issues that lead to reluctance or anxiety to try foods with certain textures or colors.

## What Are the Treatment Methods Available for Eating Disorders?

A growing body of literature suggests that eating disorders in children can be treated by numerous psychological interventions, nutrition management strategies, and approaches, including virtual or telehealth-based practices or guided self-help modalities for caregivers.

- **Psychological Interventions**

According to a *review article* published in 2023 in the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, family-based treatment (FBT), individual therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and interpersonal therapy can help manage and improve eating disorders. As per a growing body of literature, these treatment strategies can help the child work through unhealthy thoughts and behaviors associated with eating disorders while addressing the social and emotional issues attributed to the condition.

- **Nutritional Management**

A 2021 article published in the journal *Nutrients* states that behavioral therapy can help children struggling with eating disorders develop healthy eating habits. Moreover, according to this study, behavioral therapy can address and resolve the emotional triggers associated with eating disorders. It can help children make better decisions related to food consumption by improving self-control.







## Conclusion

Although children could be a little picky with their food, it is important to note whether the reluctance to a certain food texture, color, or taste is persistent. Persistent and severe reluctance can often be associated with eating disorders. It is also important for healthcare professionals to be mindful of the psychological distress that children may experience while eating a particular food, as eating disorders are often associated with anxiety, depression, and other behavioral health issues. Eating disorders can have serious physical and psychological health implications for children, affecting their cognitive and physical development. Promoting body-positive images and creating a supportive environment where children are not judged for their bodies is highly essential to fostering healthy and happy children.

## Image Citation:

- Image 1:  
[https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/baby-girl-having-enough-healthy-food\\_5474931.htm#query=eating%20disorder%20child&position=5&from\\_view=keyword&track=ais](https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/baby-girl-having-enough-healthy-food_5474931.htm#query=eating%20disorder%20child&position=5&from_view=keyword&track=ais)
- Image 2:  
[https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/little-girl-happy-with-pasta-dish\\_5500675.htm#query=eating%20disorder%20child&position=3&from\\_view=keyword&track=ais](https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/little-girl-happy-with-pasta-dish_5500675.htm#query=eating%20disorder%20child&position=3&from_view=keyword&track=ais)

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