

## Eating Disorder Behaviors in Adolescents on the Rise (by Patricia Purcell, MD, MBA)

As pediatricians, we recognize that children need to be protected from COVID-19 to aid in returning to some semblance of normalcy. With these thoughts in mind, a 15-year-old male patient has arrived in your office for his yearly well check. You last saw him on a telehealth visit for anxiety. While reminding yourself to discuss the COVID-19 vaccine, you realize that he has lost 15 pounds over the last year. Could your patient have eating disorder behaviors?

“Although previously mischaracterized as diseases of non-Hispanic white, affluent adolescent girls, eating disorder behaviors are increasingly recognized across all racial and ethnic groups and in lower socioeconomic classes, preadolescent children, males, and children and adolescents perceived as having an average or increased body size.” **TRUE or FALSE**  
[\(Pediatrics January 2021 Identification and Management of Eating disorder in Children and Adolescents.\)](#)

While we monitor an adolescent’s health as it pertains to COVID-19, many of our adolescents are struggling. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected their mental and physical health. Attempts at determining how many adolescents have been affected is difficult. Medical health visits, school counselors and sport coaches have experienced decreased interactions which has led to decreased referral sources.

Anxiety and isolation have given rise to adolescents struggling with body image issues, subsequently leading to increased disordered eating; new cases as well as relapses. Programs that treat eating disorders are seeing increased need. This is leading to long wait times for inpatient and out-patient treatment. Telehealth is now offered by many facilities, but insurance coverage may vary from state to state.

Examining the “triggers” can aid us in offering advice and assistance to our patients and their families. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2020/12/17/peds.2020-040279> Adolescents are feeling “out of control” in part due to the social isolation they are experiencing. The inability to attend school and participate in their daily routines as well as loss of friends and activities compounds this isolation. At the same time, various family stressors with job losses, financial considerations, food insecurity and even death of a family member further accentuate their anxiety and isolation.

Adolescents may use eating habits to manage their boredom and stress. Disrupted sleeping, snacking and lack of healthy food choices promote disordered eating.  
<https://www.healio.com/news/pediatrics/20210616/us-adolescents-consume-up-to-64-of-added-sugars-fats-grains-through->

[snacking?utm\\_source=selligent&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=news&M\\_BT=73472286325](https://www.selleck.com/news/press-releases/2020/04/snacking?utm_source=selligent&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=news&M_BT=73472286325)

Adolescents may seek out health information on fitness and exercise with a focus on slim or sculpted bodies. And of course, while increased social media can contribute to less social isolation, the messaging can contribute to an adolescent's anxiety.

What do we do as pediatricians? Early identification is pivotal in developing a multidisciplinary treatment plan. The three most common eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder. Concurrently, pediatricians are seeing accelerated weight gain in adolescents. Speaking to parents and listening to their concerns if they question their adolescent's eating habits is essential. Offering the patient and parents valid disordered eating information including screening tools to complement the treatment plan.

This will educate parents on how to speak "what to say" to their adolescents. Support with therapy, close follow up in medical offices, consideration of hospitalization if necessary are all possible interventions. Importantly, we must address anxiety and depression which may coexist with disordered eating.

The answer is **TRUE**. Disordered eating can occur in patients of all races, gender, and socioeconomic status and should be considered a public health matter. While this is not a direct effect of the COVID-19 virus, the pandemic has provoked mental illness in our adolescents that will echo for years.

Resources: -

[Eating Disorder in Teens During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[Eating to Cope With the COVID-19 Pandemic and Body Weight Change in Young Adults](#)

[COVID-19's Impact on Patients with Eating Disorders: The Relationship Between Eating Disorder/Mental Health Symptoms and Eating Disorder Motivation to Recover](#)

[The Effects of the COVID-19 Quarantine on Patients Diagnosed With an Eating Disorder and Identifying Factors Predicting Disordered Eating Behavior](#)

[Impact of COVID-19 on Access to Eating Disorder Treatment](#)