

students with anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a serious medical and psychiatric condition marked by unhealthy thoughts and behaviors related to food and body image. Students with eating disorders often have a negative perception of their weight or body shape. The two most common types are:

- **Anorexia Nervosa:** Characterized by a distorted body image and an intense fear of gaining weight. Students severely restrict food intake or exercise excessively, leading to significant weight loss.
- **Bulimia Nervosa:** Involves repeated episodes of binge eating followed by behaviors to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, or misuse of laxatives and medications.

Common Myths About Eating Disorders

- **Myth:** You're not sick unless you're extremely thin.
- **Truth:** Most individuals with eating disorders do not reach a state of starvation.
- **Myth:** Children under 15 are too young to have an eating disorder.
- **Truth:** Eating disorders have been diagnosed in children as young as five.
- **Myth:** People choose to have eating disorders.
- **Truth:** Eating disorders are not a choice.
- **Myth:** Reaching a normal weight means anorexia is cured.
- **Truth:** Recovery is a long-term process. Weight restoration is just one step.
- **Myth:** Only females have eating disorders.
- **Truth:** Males can also be affected, though they may express concerns differently.
- **Myth:** Eating disorders are about changes to appearance.
- **Truth:** They are related to emotional issues like low self-esteem and a need for control.

How can eating disorder affect a student at school?

Children with eating disorders are often high achievers but may struggle in the following areas:

- **Academic:** difficulty concentrating and staying focused, lower ability to complete tasks, spending excessive time on assignments to ensure perfection
- **Social/Emotional:** changes in attitude or academic performance, concerns about body image, appears overweight but eats very little in front of others, displays sadness, anxiety, or feelings of worthlessness, withdraws socially, shows increased concern with being "perfect", irritability and mood changes, talks about food frequently, avoids the cafeteria and carries personal food, denies any issues
- **Physical:** nausea, headaches, dizziness, and fatigue, Increased susceptibility to illness due to a weakened immune system, either low energy or excessive restlessness, sudden weight changes, complaints of abdominal pain, feeling faint, cold, or tired, dry skin or hair, dehydration, presence of lanugo (fine body hair), reduced performance in sports exercises excessively, makes frequent bathroom visits, wears baggy clothes to hide body changes

How can schools support students with eating disorders?

Academic

- Refer student for academic interventions under **Section 504** or **IDEA** (Other Health Impairment).
- Assign a **manageable workload** focused on **quality over quantity** as need.
- Allow **flexible deadlines** for assignments, projects, quizzes, and tests.
- Adjust schedules to avoid missing **core subjects** due to medical appointments.
- Provide **staff training** and share relevant information about the condition.
- Maintain **consistent communication** with families to monitor progress and adjust support (emails, progress notes, conferences).

Social and Emotional

- Meet with the student and family before the student **returns to school**.
- Recognize the student's **need for perfection** and **provide reassurance**.
- Support the student in **reconnecting with peers**.
- Ensure the student has access to a **trusted adult for support**.

Physical

- Excuse the student from **physical education** if necessary.
- Provide **supervised lunches** and **monitor snacks**.
- Monitor for **medication side effects** (e.g., drowsiness).
- Allow **elevator access** if stairs pose a safety risk.
- Provide **two sets of textbooks** (home and school) to reduce fatigue.

Treatment at Children's Health

Eating disorders can become chronic, severe, and even life-threatening if not treated properly. The Center for Pediatric Eating Disorders at Children's Health is the only facility in Texas and the surrounding region offering a full range of specialized services for children and adolescents. With over 20 years of experience, the center provides expert care from highly trained clinicians. For more information, call **214-456-8899**.

More Resources

- **National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA)**
Educator and Coach Toolkit: nationaleatingdisorders.org/toolkits
- **The Elisa Project**
Overcoming Eating Disorders Through Knowledge: theelisaproject.org

SCHOOL SERVICES

For more information, visit childrens.com/school-services

