

Preventing Eating Disorders in Children

When it comes to eating disorders, we think of adolescents and adults being affected. Smaller children can unfortunately develop eating disorders as well, and with this being a pivotal time of development it is extremely important that they receive treatment and/or intervention. Eating disorders can be caused by physical health problems, genetics, anxiety or stress, and trauma.

The numbers of eating disorders in children are on the rise with some being more prevalent. The ones I see most frequently in our WIC office are PICA and food hoarding, though ARFID is on the rise.

PICA is when a person consumes non-food items such as paper, paint chips, ice or dirt. It is usually due to a nutritional deficiency with iron, calcium and zinc being the most common deficiencies. An example would be craving or eating a lot of ice. It is a common sign of iron deficiency anemia. PICA is also seen in children with autism spectrum disorder and/or intellectual disability (ID). Treatment for PICA involves a healthy, well-rounded diet and sometimes supplements depending on the child's age. As with any health issue, consult your child's pediatrician and keep a close eye on the little ones to prevent them from eating non-food items.

Another eating disorder I see is food hoarding, often in little ones that have experienced long and repetitive bouts of hunger. When they finally do have access to food, they stash it away, hiding it in their pockets in case they are again in that situation of having no food available. This food insecurity can last throughout their lifetime. If this problem is addressed early the child may not suffer long-term psychological issues. This can be accomplished if they are no longer in the environment where food is not routinely available, and unfortunately, we aren't always aware of these situations to intervene.

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) is the disorder that I have noticed increasing over the last few years in the participants that we see in our WIC office, and usually I see it with the children diagnosed with autism. ARFID is when children have a disturbance in their eating due to such things as texture issues or a history of choking on food. They often can't swallow food they might have enjoyed before because they develop an aversion to that texture or they relate it to choking. If they have been sick due to a certain food, they may not eat it again for fear it will cause stomach pain as it did before. If extreme, these aversions can lead to nutritional deficiencies and weight loss.

Feeding a child and establishing good eating habits is one of the most important things we can do as a parent. We need to teach them the benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables, to limit high fat and sugar content foods, to drink plenty of water, and to be active. Get outside and walk, play, climb a tree, toss a ball...anything!! Children thrive on activity for physical and mental health.

Meals should be a time to sit together as a family and converse, to BE a family and talk...no phones, no television, no interruptions. Even better, when a child is old enough, involve them in making the meal. Little ones can help with washing the fruits and vegetables, tearing up lettuce for salads, stirring, juicing with a plastic juicer, adding herbs to dishes, measuring, rolling out dough with a rolling pin, etc. It provides a closeness and connection they will remember and pass on to their children and grandchildren. This type of interaction and connection makes it easier to prevent or notice some eating disorders before they become extreme. Make the connection with your children regarding food and good eating habits from the time they are small and hopefully you won't have to deal with the more commonly known eating disorders in adolescence.

For more information, contact your child's healthcare provider.

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