



Patient & Family Guide

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How to Support Your Child or Adolescent With Eating When They Have an Eating Disorder



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How to Support Your Child or Adolescent With Eating When They Have an Eating Disorder

When a person has an eating disorder, they have trouble choosing foods that will help them live a good life. **An eating disorder needs to be treated as soon as possible.** Not having enough nutrition can cause serious medical problems.

You play an important role in your child or adolescent's (teen's) recovery. You can help them during meals by doing the following:

- Decide what they will eat. **It is very important that all caregivers involved agree on this.** If each caregiver gives the child or adolescent a different choice, their eating disorder may try to bargain with you or make special requests. It is important for you to be in charge at this stage in their treatment and make all of the food choices.
- You will choose what your child or adolescent eats each day. This involves grocery shopping, preparing meals, choosing portion sizes, serving meals, and supervising your child or adolescent while they eat.

- Provide 3 meals and 3 snacks:
 - › Breakfast
 - › Morning snack
 - › Lunch
 - › Afternoon snack
 - › Dinner
 - › Bedtime snack
- Serve meals and snacks about 2 to 3 hours apart. This will help to re-establish normal hunger cues (feelings of hunger). After having eaten so little for so long, a person with an eating disorder will not get hunger cues. They will often feel full or bloated. Eating every 2 to 3 hours helps hunger cues come back.
- Include juice or milk with each meal and snack. **Do not provide skim milk or diet drinks** (like diet soda, drinks that are low in fat or have zero sugar).
- **Do not provide diet or low-calorie foods.** Avoid items that are labelled as ‘low calorie’ or ‘low fat’.

- **Do not** avoid foods that your child or adolescent's eating disorder wants to avoid. If they ate a certain food before they got sick, keep offering that food.
 - › For example, your child or adolescent's eating disorder may want to avoid bread. If they ate bread before they got sick, they should keep eating it now.

Remember: A person with an eating disorder will not want to eat foods that they find scary. But avoiding these foods will not help with their recovery.

- Eat with them together as a family. This will help to show them normal eating habits and portion sizes.
- Make sure they eat. **They are not ready to be responsible for their own meals.** Encourage them to eat all of the food you serve. If they refuse, encourage them to keep eating. Eating will help with their recovery.

- During meal times, you can talk about things that are not related to weight, body image, body shape, food, or calories. Try distracting them by talking about things they enjoy. Ask them open-ended questions like, “Tell me about your day”, or “What do you think we should do this weekend?”
- If you feel angry or frustrated, remember that it is the eating disorder making you feel this way. Try not to take your feelings out on your child or adolescent. Try to stay calm and help them by validating (letting them know that their feelings and opinions are worthy and recognized) how they are feeling. Let them know that you recognize that this is hard. Offer ideas for distraction (like watching TV, doing a craft, reading a book).
- Do something they enjoy after a meal. They will often feel guilty and anxious about having eaten.
- Supervise your child after eating to make sure they do not get rid of the food they just ate.
 - › The urge to throw up may be strongest for an hour after eating. This is how long it takes for their body to fully absorb the food.
 - › The urge to exercise may also be stronger right after eating.
- Try to stay in the moment. Focus on one meal at a time.

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Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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Prepared by: Nova Scotia Eating Disorder Provincial Service, Nova Scotia Health & IWK Health

Adapted from: "Meal Support at Home - Empowering Families to Provide Meal Support at Home..."

(IWK Health Centre)

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If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.