

Eating Disorders: Choosing a Treatment Team

Treatment typically involves collaboration between the person experiencing the eating disorder, their family or carer and a range of health professionals. It is important to have a good relationship with the health professionals in your treatment team.

This means that they should understand the experience of living with an eating disorder, and that you and your family should:

- Feel comfortable to talk openly without fear of judgement.
- Trust the team.
- Be able to work with the professionals as a team.

Eating disorders are complex illnesses, impacted by genetic, biological, psychological and socio-cultural factors.

Treatment can be tough and may impact how you feel about the treatment team, so it is important to separate the challenges of treatment from any tensions in these relationships. It is important to understand that a good health professional will not always say what you want to hear. That will be because they are challenging the eating disorder.

If you do not feel listened to and understood, or if your health professionals are not working with you towards improving your symptoms, quality of life or working towards recovery, then it may be appropriate to seek treatment elsewhere.

What professionals should be involved?

It is recommended that at a minimum you involve in your team:

1. **Medical Practitioner**
2. **Mental Health Practitioner**
3. **Dietitian**

1. Medical Practitioners

General Practitioner

For many people the General Practitioner (GP) will be the first point of contact with the health system.

A GP is a doctor who has general medical expertise.

A GP will be able to:

- Do a physical health assessment
- Provide information about eating disorders
- Make a referral to a mental health professional for a more detailed assessment and treatment
- Make a referral to a dietitian for specialist dietary support and treatment
- Provide information about other support services
- Make arrangements for a hospital admission to restore physical health, if required
- Talk to carers or parents to help them understand what is happening



Psychiatrist

A psychiatrist is a medical practitioner who specialises in the diagnosis and treatment of mental, emotional and behavioural disorders.

A psychiatrist can:

- Provide a thorough assessment
- Develop treatment plans
- Provide ongoing therapy
- Prescribe medication and monitor how the medication is working

Paediatrician

A paediatrician is a doctor who has medical expertise with infants, children and adolescents.

Paediatricians can:

- Conduct an initial assessment
- Talk to carers or parents to help them understand what is happening
- Provide information about treatment options
- Make referrals to other specialist services
- Admit patients to hospital and develop treatment plans for medically unstable children and adolescents
- Specialise in the medical management of younger patients with eating disorders

Physician

A physician is a doctor who has undertaken further training in a medical specialty to diagnose and manage complex problems.

This may include:

- An endocrinologist who will look into hormonal imbalances, particularly the absence of normal menstruation in females
- A gastroenterologist who will look into issues regarding the gastrointestinal tract, particularly in relation to pain, constipation and vomiting caused by restricting and purging behaviours

2. Mental Health Professionals

Mental health professionals can provide evidence-based care for people with an eating disorder.

Psychologist

Psychologists are commonly involved in the treatment of eating disorders. They will use a variety of therapeutic approaches to address the psychological issues associated with the eating disorder as well as other problems that the person may be experiencing alongside the eating disorder.

Social Worker

A social worker is often involved with treatment if the person presents with behavioural, social or mental health problems in addition to an eating disorder.

Social workers can provide individual, couple and family counselling for the person and their carers or family. They can also provide evidence-based treatment for eating disorders and facilitate other supports that may be needed.

Occupational Therapist

Occupational therapists and rehabilitation therapists help someone to develop, practice and implement the life skills they require to address disordered eating behaviours. They can also provide evidence-based treatment for eating disorders.

Nurses and Mental Health Nurses

Nurses and mental health nurses form a part of the multidisciplinary treatment team. Their role is to provide practical medical and mental health care for someone experiencing an eating disorder while that person is hospitalised or gaining treatment via the health system.

Family Therapist

For children and adolescents, the treatment with the most evidence is family-based treatment (FBT). This therapy can be delivered by different types of health practitioners (e.g. psychologists, social workers, counsellors), not just those called family therapists. This type of therapy will not suit all families, so work with your health practitioners to determine if it is likely to work for you.

3. Dietitians

An Accredited Practising Dietitian is a health professional qualified in nutrition and dietetics, and registered with the Dietitians Association of Australia. A dietitian can provide nutrition support and counselling to guide an individual with an eating disorder to address their relationship with food, and actively renourish their body through learning how to eat well.

“A turning point for me was finding a psychologist who understood me. I could talk to her about anything and felt supported and empowered. My GP was also great. She always called me to make sure I booked my next appointment.”

- Sarah, 25