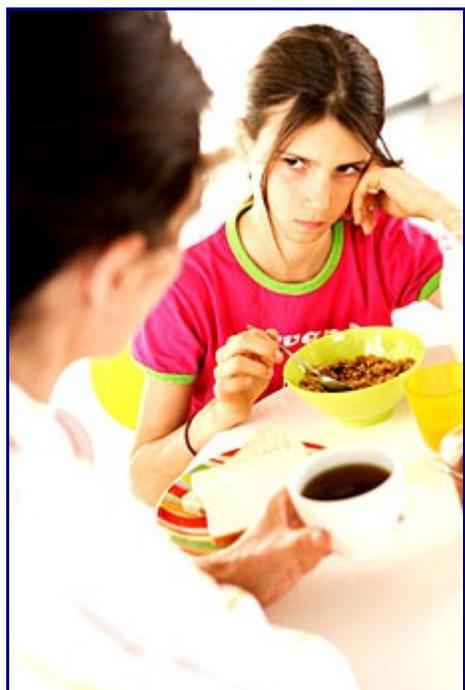


Children as young as six suffering from anorexia

Last updated at 12:41pm on 26th March 2007 Daily Mail



Model behaviour? The youngest child diagnosed with an eating disorder was just six years old

Children as young as six are being diagnosed with eating disorders. The shock findings come from the first national study into eating disorders in those under the age of 13.

The condition is more severe in young children as anorexia can permanently stunt growth, affect future fertility and damage bones.

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Over a 13-month period from March 2005, 206 preteenage children across Britain and Ireland were newly diagnosed with serious disorders ranging from bulimia and anorexia to binge eating.

Half were admitted to hospitals for in-patient treatment. Some were showing symptoms of starvation such as a low temperature and a slow heart rate, while 10 per cent had to be fed by tube.

The youngest child diagnosed with an eating disorder in that period was just six years old and was showing signs of anorexia. An eight-year-old girl was the youngest to be newly diagnosed with

anorexia.

Dr Dasha Nicholls, child and adolescent psychiatrist at Great Ormond Street hospital, said: "These are the sickest children on the spectrum. The typical pattern is that children will cut out anything they perceive to be fattening such as chocolate, sweets and puddings. Becoming vegetarian is often the first step as well."

Over one third of the children in the study with eating disorders suffered from anorexia and almost half exercised excessively to keep their weight down.

Nearly 60 per cent of the children have since improved. The report, which will be presented at a conference in York this week, comes just weeks after the fashion industry was criticised over the size-zero culture.

Experts said younger children tend to be more body aware and take a greater interest in fashion and celebrity culture. They are also likely to be influenced by parents on diets and exercising excessively. Research earlier this year showed anorexia may have a genetic link.

It is thought there are between 60,000 and 90,000 adults being treated for eating disorders at any one time in the UK. The average age of diagnosis is between 16 and 18, but this is the first time younger children have been studied.

Around 2,600 doctors, including paediatricians and child psychiatrists, were asked to report cases to the British Paediatric Surveillance Unit at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.

Dr Nicholls warned parents that young children with eating disorders can become ill very quickly but it can still be months before the signs are picked up.

Dr Mark Berelowitz, who runs a child and adolescent psychiatry unit at the Royal Free hospital, said eating disorders in young children are no longer unusual: "Eating disorders tend to be more insidious in young children, they have been under-eating for ages and it has become normal for them.

"Any doctor who comes into contact with a child who is not growing properly, is a bit pale and a bit tired and is told they are always a bit thin and are a fussy, small eater should be alert to the fact there could be a problem."

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This anti-fat thing and size zero is getting out of control, especially when it reaches children! Children are not meant to be thin, at least if they're a little large that means they can stave stave off illness and lose weight without being at risk of becoming dangerously thin!

Shame on the people who make children, innocent children, feel upset and outcasted because they're obese. This pushes them into becoming bulimic and anorexic and the obsession with being thin and beautiful is a travesty.

Why can't children just be children?

- Chantelle, Walsall

If children are about and playing with their friends and in organised sport, there is absolutely no need to watch and monitor what they are eating.

Anything they eat will be burned up with all their energy. Cut the TV and computer use, starting serving up meat and two veg on a regular basis and get them back outside and playing - body weight, be it too little or too much, will then not be a problem.

- Jo, Singapore

My granddaughter is seven, her mother is a qualified chef. Everything that my granddaughter eats is fresh and home-cooked. So why did a healthy looking child be subjected to the teacher's and dinner staff at school making a big issue about her not eating a sandwich? Surely the parents should be approached first if they think there is a problem rather than the child being subjected to embarrassment in front of their school mates? I suffered the same treatment and still suffer from anorexia nearly 50 years later. It's in the schools it starts and then just gets worse.

- Cath, UK