Helping someone with an eating disorder  
Information for carers

What are eating disorders?
Eating disorders are abnormal patterns of eating and exercising that severely interfere with a person’s everyday life. These patterns can include eating extremely small amounts of food or eating in an uncontrolled way.

The person may also be very distressed, anxious or worried about food, body weight and appearance.

The most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder.

Helpful hints
If you are the family member, friend or carer of someone with an eating disorder, here are few things you can do to help:
• provide support to the person, including reassurance, listening, comfort and assistance to get help
• be reassuring that people with eating disorders can and do get better
• when a person is not responding to treatment for eating disorders, provide reassurance that this does not mean they cannot succeed in the future
• encourage the person to be proud of the positive steps they are taking toward recovery
• suggest to the person that they surround themselves with people who are supportive.

What to avoid
When supporting a person with an eating disorder avoid the following:
• letting issues of food dominate your relationship
• conflict or arguments over food
• giving advice about weight loss or exercise
• that physical appearance is vital for happiness and success
• comments about the person’s weight or appearance.

In an emergency
Get medical help immediately if the person:
• deliberately injures themselves
• expresses thoughts of suicide or of harming someone else
• is disorientated (does not know who they are, where there are, or what time of day it is)
• has delusions (false beliefs) or hallucinations (seeing, hearing, feeling or smelling things that do not exist)
• has a pulse that is very slow (less than 50 beats per minute) or very fast (more than 120 beats per minute), or an irregular heartbeat
• is confused or not making sense
• is complaining of chest pain
• has collapsed or is too weak to walk
• is experiencing fainting spells
• has blood in their bowel movements, urine or vomit
• has cold, clammy skin or a very low body temperature (less than 35°C)
• is vomiting several times a day
• seems to be dehydrated
• has painful muscle spasms.

If the person has any of the symptoms listed above or you are concerned about anything else that is not listed, call 000, or visit the emergency department at your nearest hospital.
What you can do if a person doesn’t want help

Generally, an adult has the right to refuse treatment. But they can be treated without their consent if their life is in danger or if they lack the capacity to consent.

If the situation is not an emergency, continue with your support, and be open, approachable and non-judgemental.

It is OK to tell the person that you are concerned and that you care for them.

If the person won’t agree to go to their appointment:
• Let them talk about what is worrying them
• Give them emotional support and encouragement
• Talk about what kind of practical help the person needs to be able to go to their appointments
• Contact the healthcare team for advice.

Looking after yourself

Having a loved one with an eating disorder does not mean that you are a ‘bad’ parent, partner, brother, sister, child or friend.

There is no evidence to suggest that any family dysfunction is the cause of eating disorders.

You will probably feel some pain, suffering, sadness, guilt or despair of your own.

Being the main support person can be hard work and it may sometimes feel that you are getting nowhere. Never blame yourself.

You are not alone. It can be very hard to understand a person’s eating disorder.

It can be helpful to:
• Find reliable information and support if you feel you need to – for yourself and other family members
• Take some time away from the person to do something for yourself
• Join a self-help group for carers of people with eating disorders so you can talk about your thoughts and feelings with others who truly understand
• Look out for psychological symptoms of your own that may be caused by the situation (e.g. depression), and get treatment
• Talk to your GP who can refer you to someone who can help.

More information and support

• Queensland Eating Disorder Service (QuEDS)
• The Butterfly Foundation
• Eating Disorders Queensland Ltd (formerly The Eating Issues Centre and the Eating Disorders Association)
• National Eating Disorders Collaboration
• Eating Disorders First Aid Guidelines—Mental Health First Aid Australia
• SANE Australia

Helpful resources

• The Carers Help Kit

Contact us

For more information contact your GP or the Eating Disorders Service intake officer:
• phone: 5202 9500 (Monday to Friday 9am to 12pm)
• email: SC-MHAS-EDS@health.qld.gov.au

How are we doing?

Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service is committed to providing exceptional patient care. We would love to hear your feedback about your experience with us. Your compliment, complaint and suggestions will assist us to identify what things we are doing well and what we need to improve. Your feedback will help us to provide the best possible care and service to our patients and families.

Submitting feedback

• talk to any staff member within the hospital
• talk to a senior manager within the hospital
• complete a compliment or complaint feedback form, ask a staff member for a form.

If you have concerns a Patient Liaison Officer can help you. Contact them on 5470 5085. You can also speak with an Independent Patient Rights Adviser, contact 5470 5546.

Office of the Health Ombudsman

If you submitted feedback and are unhappy with the way your concern was handled, you can contact the Office of the Health Ombudsman. They offer a free, impartial and independent service if you have a complaint about a health service provided to you, a family member or someone in your care.

Telephone: 133 646 (131 OHO)
Online: www.oho.qld.gov.au
Email: complaints@oho.qld.gov.au