

Eating disorders affect a person's health and safety, ability to work or study and often require the support of carers and others. Dental practitioners may be among the first people to observe signs of an eating disorder in their patient. Use this chart to guide your assessment and response when you suspect a patient may be experiencing or at risk of an eating disorder.

Know

Know the [behavioural, physical and psychological signs and symptoms](#) of eating disorders as well as the [oral signs](#)

Know the [high risk groups](#) for eating disorders (e.g. young people, people with history of food insecurity, people who are dieting, etc).

Know your [practice's protocols](#) for supporting a person with a mental illness, including how you approach [suicide risk assessment and emergency phone numbers for cases of immediate risk](#).

Observe, ask and listen

Observe warning signs and risk indicators, remembering the patient may not overtly mention them. Ask the questions in the S.C.O.F.F. Explain your concerns. **Ask** the patient what they think.

Listen to what they (or their family or carers) tell you and assess risk: Is the person physically and psychologically safe?

Immediate risk indicators

- Talking about suicide or plans to end life
- Marked confusion
- Faintness or dizziness
- Irregular, very fast or very slow pulse
- Low alertness, seeming lethargic or sleepy
- Irregular, deep breathing or frequent sighing
- Signs of fluid retention or swelling
- Involuntary muscle twitches or spasms

Warning signs

A patient may show one, many or none of the common [warning signs](#).

- Behavioural, e.g. changes in clothing
- Physical, e.g. enamel erosion or dry mouth
- Psychological, e.g. 'black and white' thinking

S.C.O.F.F. ([BMJ 1999;319:1467](#))

Ask the patient these five questions. An answer of 'yes' to two or more questions indicates a need for referral and assessment.

S – Do you make yourself Sick because you feel uncomfortably full?

C – Do you worry you have lost Control over how much you eat?

O – Have you recently lost Over 6kg in a three-month period?

F – Do you believe yourself to be Fat when others say you are too thin?

F – Would you say Food dominates your life?

Act

The patient is at immediate risk:

- Risk of suicide
- Physical health, e.g. signs of irregular heartbeat, fainting or marked confusion

Call for assistance immediately: Emergency services (000) or relevant local acute mental health team.

Stay with the patient until handover.

INTERVENTION FOR THIS EMERGENCY PREVAILS OVER ALL

Follow your practice's protocols to manage a patient during hospitalisation or medical emergency. Remember the person may not have decision-making capacity.

Once the person is stabilised and crisis response is no longer required...

You have concerns about the patient's eating or body image, but they are not at immediate risk.

Check if health professional involved, Or, refer to GP for management Or, refer to Butterfly National Helpline (1800 ED HOPE) if needed.

The GP will coordinate a [multidisciplinary care team; dentists sit alongside, rather than within the core team](#).

Get patient consent to stay in contact with the team and contribute to monitoring the patient's progress.

Participate in the multidisciplinary care plan as indicated.

[Work towards recovery and wellness](#).

Continue to manage oral health.

[Provide education](#) about minimising damage associated with the eating disorder as relevant.

The patient does not give any indication of a current problem with food, eating or body image.

Give information: www.nedc.com.au

Continue to monitor.

Ask again if you suspect again.

For assistance to locate local services, for direct counselling for your patients, or for professional support if you need it, contact the Butterfly National Helpline:

1800 33 4673 (1800 ED HOPE)
8 am-midnight, 7 days

<https://thebutterflyfoundation.org.au/our-services/helpline/chat-online/>

For more information about eating disorders, including fact sheets and professional development, see the National Eating Disorders Collaboration: www.nedc.com.au