

Study Reveals Early Warning Signs of Eating Disorders

20 million women and 10 million men suffer from an eating disorder at some time in their life in the United States. This can include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, or a binge eating disorder. It's a startling statistic, but the actual number could be even higher, as many people don't seek help for their disorder.

Now a new large scale study, published in *British Journal of Psychiatry* by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, has revealed some early warning signs that someone might be suffering from an eating disorder. Researchers hope the findings give primary care physicians and mental health professionals a better chance of detecting eating disorders earlier in their patients.

The research team analyzed electronic health records of 15,558 who were diagnosed as having eating disorders. In the two years leading up to their official diagnosis, these patients had:

- Higher levels of other mental health disorders such as alcohol disorders or depression
- Higher levels of accidents, injuries and self-harm
- Higher rate of prescriptions for antipsychotics and antidepressants
- Higher rate of prescriptions for gastrointestinal drugs and for dietetic supplements

According to Kathy Franczak, OSF HealthCare Eating Disorder Program Counselor, those suffering from an eating disorders often try to hide their symptoms, and friends and family should also be aware of drastic changes to someone's personality or attitude toward food.

However approaching a person about a possible eating disorder can be an intimidating task. If you are concerned that someone might have an eating disorder, Franczak suggests speaking with them using "I" statements (I am concerned about...), without placing any blame on the person you are trying to help.

"Shame and guilt are some of those core issues that a lot of people have when they have an eating disorder," said Franczak. "The first step, I would say, is number one: don't ignore it. I think that people think, 'Oh, it's just a phase, it'll go away.' Trust your gut and really address that person, but do so in a very caring way, in a very compassionate way, tell them that you love and care about them, but then say, 'I'm worried about you because, this is why.'"

Another thing to be aware of: Franczak says many people have body insecurity issues, and off-handed comments can do more damage than we think. She advises that before a person complains about their body or weight, they should stop and think what kind of impact those words can have.

"People will talk about, 'I was bad today,' or 'Oh I have to go on a diet tomorrow,' and I think that's something that as a culture we have to be aware of the kind of language we use. It can trigger your son or daughter, it can trigger a family member, it can trigger your spouse," said Franczak.

There are programs to help. The OSF Saint Francis Medical Center [Eating Disorders Program](#) offers outpatient counseling, an intensive outpatient program, and a partial hospitalization program. Information is available by calling 309-655-2738.

There is also a weekly support group on the OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center Campus in Peoria. The group meets on Wednesday evenings from 6:16 - 7:30 PM in the lower level of the Allied Building (320 E Armstrong Ave., Peoria, IL 61603). There are two groups that meet – people struggling with eating disorders and those who support them. The meetings are free, and no registration is required.

Additional resources can be found through the National Eating Disorders Association [website](#).