Screening for Eating Disorders in Adolescents and Adults

The Task Force issued a draft recommendation statement on Screening for Eating Disorders in Adolescents and Adults. The Task Force determined that there is not enough evidence to recommend for or against screening for eating disorders in adolescents and adults who show no signs or symptoms of an eating disorder. This draft recommendation statement does not apply to adolescents or adults who have signs or symptoms of an eating disorder or who have been previously diagnosed with an eating disorder.

Facts About Eating Disorders
Eating disorders can cause serious harm to people’s mental and physical health. While anyone can develop an eating disorder, the factors that can increase a person’s risk include trauma, problems in childhood, perfectionism, social pressure related to appearance, the presence of other mental health conditions, and genetics. Certain groups are also at increased risk, including athletes, females, younger adults ages 18 to 29, and transgender individuals. Common eating disorders include anorexia, binge eating disorder, and bulimia.

Facts About Screening for Eating Disorders in Adolescents and Adults
Screening for eating disorders can be done by using questionnaires that ask about eating habits, feelings about eating, and perception of weight and weight gain. However, there is limited information about the use of these questionnaires in people who are not showing signs and symptoms of an eating disorder.

Potential Benefits and Harms of Screening for Eating Disorders in Adolescents and Adults
Screening for eating disorders has the potential to decrease negative health outcomes and improve health if it leads to early detection and effective treatment. However, there is very limited evidence on the benefits of screening teens and adults without symptoms in primary care, so the Task Force is calling for more research on this important topic. There is also not enough evidence to determine if there are harms associated with screening all teens and adults who do not have signs or symptoms. Potential harms may include false-positive screening results (results that indicate someone has an eating disorder when they do not actually have one) that lead to unnecessary referrals for treatment, as well as anxiety and stigma.

This recommendation is only for people without signs or symptoms of an eating disorder. It is important that anyone who has concerns about their eating talk to their clinician to get the care they need.
The Draft Recommendation on Screening for Eating Disorders in Adolescents and Adults: What Does It Mean?

Here is the Task Force’s draft recommendation on screening for eating disorders in adolescents and adults. It is based on the quality and strength of the evidence about the potential benefits and harms of screening for this purpose. It is also based on the size of the potential benefits and harms. Task Force recommendation grades are explained in the box at the end of this fact sheet.

When the Task Force issues an I Statement, it means that the current evidence is insufficient to assess the balance of benefits and harms of the service.

Before you send comments to the Task Force, you may want to read the draft recommendation statement. The recommendation statement explains the evidence the Task Force reviewed and how it decided on the grade. An evidence document provides more detail about the scientific studies the Task Force reviewed.

The USPSTF concludes that the current evidence is insufficient to assess the balance of benefits and harms of screening for eating disorders in adolescents and adults. (I Statement)

Notes

evidence is insufficient
There is not enough information to make a recommendation.

screening
Using questionnaires that help indicate whether a person may have an eating disorder.

eating disorders
Group of mental health conditions noted by a significant change in eating or eating-related behaviors that can cause serious harm to people’s mental and physical health.

adolescents and adults
Individuals ages 10 years or older.
What is the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force?

The Task Force is an independent, non-federal, volunteer group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine. The Task Force works to improve the health of people nationwide by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services, such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medicines. The recommendations apply to people with no signs or symptoms of the disease being discussed.

To develop a recommendation statement, Task Force members consider the best available science and research on a topic. For each topic, the Task Force posts draft documents for public comment, including a draft recommendation statement. All comments are reviewed and considered in developing the final recommendation statement. To learn more, visit the Task Force website.

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Click Here to Learn More About Eating Disorders

- Eating Disorders (MyHealthfinder)
- Eating Disorders (MedlinePlus)
- Eating Disorders: About More Than Food (National Institute of Mental Health)
- Eating Disorders (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services)

Click Here to Comment on the Draft Recommendation

The Task Force welcomes comments on this draft recommendation.

Comments must be received between October 19, 2021 - November 15, 2021.

All comments will be considered for use in writing final recommendations.