Screening for Eating Disorders in Adolescents and Adults

The US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) has recently published recommendations on screening for eating disorders in adolescents and adults.

What Is an Eating Disorder?
Eating disorders are conditions that involve a disturbance in eating that causes physical and/or psychosocial harm. While eating disorders may affect anyone, certain groups are at increased risk, including athletes, female individuals, people aged 18 to 29 years, and transgender individuals.

The main types of eating disorders include

- **Anorexia nervosa**: restriction of food intake that leads to being underweight, along with an intense fear of weight gain.
- **Binge-eating disorder**: episodes of eating large amounts of food past the point of being full, and feeling unable to control these episodes. People with binge-eating disorder tend to be overweight or obese.
- **Bulimia nervosa**: episodes of binge eating along with additional behaviors to compensate for the overeating, such as self-induced vomiting, laxative overuse, excessive exercise, or prolonged fasting. People with bulimia tend to be normal weight or overweight.

Treatment for eating disorders generally involves an interdisciplinary approach encompassing psychological/behavior therapy and medications.

What Tests Are Used to Screen for Eating Disorders?
Measuring height and weight and calculating body mass index is a standard part of routine checkups that can detect some cases of eating disorders. Additional screening questionnaires are available, such as the Eating Disorder Screen for Primary Care (EDS-PC), the Screen for Disordered Eating (SDE), and the SCOFF questionnaire.

What Is the Population Under Consideration for Screening for Eating Disorders?
This USPSTF recommendation applies to adolescents (aged ≥ 10 years) and adults who have no signs or symptoms of eating disorders and have not previously been diagnosed with an eating disorder.

What Are the Potential Benefits and Harms of Screening for Eating Disorders?
The goal of screening for eating disorders is to improve health outcomes by finding and treating eating disorders earlier. However, no studies have directly assessed the benefits of screening for eating disorders. There is some evidence that the SCOFF questionnaire is an accurate screening test for eating disorders in adult women; however, there is not enough evidence for adolescents or male individuals.

Potential harms of screening for eating disorders include false-positive results that may cause anxiety and stigma and may lead to increased medical referrals. It might also lead to unnecessary treatment with medications that can have side effects. However, no studies have directly assessed the harms of screening for eating disorders.

How Strong Is the Recommendation to Screen for Eating Disorders?
Based on current evidence, the benefits and harms of screening for eating disorders in adolescents and adults without signs or symptoms of an eating disorder are uncertain, and the balance of benefits and harms cannot be determined.

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US Preventive Services Task Force
www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/topic_search_results?topic_status=P

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