

The unrealistic quest to thinness

As a physician, you are concerned about an 11-year-old girl who, over the past two years, has progressively restricted her food intake so that she no longer eats foods with a perceived fat content. She suffers from poor self-esteem, sudden mood swings and a fear of germs. Consequently, she is constantly washing her hands to the point where they

are dry, red and peeling. At school, she is an A-student but has stopped all extra-curricular activities and has become socially isolated. Over the past year she grew only 3 cm and lost 100 g. When discussing her eating habits and weight loss, she denies any medical problems and feels that everybody dislikes her.

LEARNING POINTS

- Children under 13 years of age experience eating disorders; however, the incidence is not well established.
- 55% of eight- to 10-year-old girls are unhappy with their weight.
- 20% to 42% of nine-year-old girls are trying to lose weight.
- Preliminary data from Australia indicate that boys younger than 13 years of age are also affected.
- Present diagnostic criteria are based on clinical and research data from the older adolescent and adult population, and therefore may lack age and developmental appropriateness.
- Concurrent psychiatric illness may be identified in children with early-onset eating disorders.
- Paediatricians can teach children and their families about healthy eating and physical activity through routine office visits.

The Canadian Paediatric Surveillance Program (CPSP) is a joint project of the Canadian Paediatric Society and Health Canada's Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control that undertakes the surveillance of rare diseases and conditions in children. For more information visit our Web site at <www.cps.ca/english/cpsp> or <www.cps.ca/francais/pcsp>.