

First Contact Matters: Practical Eating Disorder Screening in Under 5 Minutes

General practice is often the first point of contact for people experiencing an eating disorder. However, most people with eating disorders never access any treatment and don't present with obvious symptoms. Patients may attend with concerns such as anxiety, depression, gastrointestinal symptoms, fatigue, weight changes, menstrual irregularities or poorly controlled chronic conditions, without recognising that an eating disorder may be contributing to their poor health.

As trusted healthcare providers, general practitioners are uniquely positioned to identify early signs and initiate conversations that may otherwise never occur. Early identification is important, as timely intervention is associated with improved health outcomes and can reduce the severity and duration of illness.

Starting the conversation

Despite the importance of early identification, many clinicians report that raising the topic of eating disorders can feel challenging. Patients may be reluctant to disclose concerns about eating, weight or body image due to shame or fear of stigma, and clinicians may worry about asking sensitive questions or feel unsure about how to begin the conversation. In the context of a busy consultation, lengthy screening tools can also be difficult to incorporate into routine practice.

Using a brief, validated screening tool can provide a structured way to introduce the topic and support further assessment where appropriate. Screening tools are designed to complement, not replace, clinical judgement and should always be interpreted alongside a comprehensive history and clinical assessment.

A practical approach in general practice

Brief screening tools can be incorporated into routine consultations when clinical suspicion exists or used opportunistically with patients who may be at increased risk. They can also support discussions when patients present with physical or psychological symptoms that may warrant further exploration. Routine screening is recommended for people in at-risk groups.

The [InsideOut Institute Screener \(IOI-S\)](#) is a six-question screening tool that can be completed in less than five minutes. The IOI-S is a validated measure that has been found to be reliable in Australian general practice settings and is recognised by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). It provides a practical way to help initiate conversations about eating disorders and identify patients who may benefit from further assessment.

The first conversation about an eating disorder can have a lasting impact. Asking a few thoughtful questions may provide an opportunity for earlier recognition, timely assessment and access to appropriate care.

While no screening tool replaces clinical expertise, incorporating brief, evidence-based screening into routine practice can help make conversations about eating disorders easier to start and support earlier intervention when it matters most.