

What to Look For in an Eating Disorder Treatment Center

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Choosing a residential treatment program for [eating disorders](#) can be challenging. Websites may show scenic landscapes and comfortable interiors, but there is an absence of industry standards and research indicating which types of programs are effective.

Specialists who treat eating disorders — illnesses that affect an estimated 30 million Americans at some point — advise looking for centers that:

- Provide information about the [average weight gain per week](#) for [anorexic](#) patients at the center and the percent of adult patients discharged with a body mass index of 19 or above, indicating a normal weight.
- Include evidence-based treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, for [bulimia](#).
- Have the resources available for emergencies and to treat patients who have coexisting medical or psychiatric problems.
- Are accredited by the Joint Commission, an independent company that accredits health care facilities, which recently adopted new requirements for such centers.

Many programs include what they call “outcome data” on their websites. But eating disorder experts say that data often excludes patients who drop out of treatment. Many also rely on telephone surveys to reach patients after discharge. “The other half of the people who didn’t answer your phone call are most likely not doing so well,” said Dr. Evelyn Attia, a psychiatry professor at Columbia University.

Outcomes data that includes only scores on tests of depression and anxiety should also be viewed skeptically, the experts said, because any treatment would probably have some beneficial effect on mood.