

# GUIDELINES

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## Guidelines on reporting anorexia and bulimia nervosa in audiovisual media

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Generalitat de Catalunya  
**Departament  
de Salut**



**Consell  
de l'Audiovisual  
de Catalunya**

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# Guidelines on reporting anorexia and bulimia nervosa in audiovisual media

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## 1. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Eating disorders, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating and other similar or incomplete conditions are a set of mental disorders with multiple causes, characterised by erroneous ideas linked to eating, weight or figure and chaotic eating behaviour such as restricting eating, binge eating or abnormal or unhealthy diets. This behaviour leads to physical or psycho-social problems in the individual. Eating disorders particularly affect women (in 9 out of 10 cases), especially girls and teenagers.

The media have an impact on public opinion and can therefore positively or negatively influence health matters, particularly when it comes to eating disorders.

Sociocultural aspects play a huge role in the onset of eating disorders. Therefore, media coverage of eating disorders, which are complex illnesses with multiple causes, and in particular coverage in the various media genres and formats (information, fiction, advertising, etc.), has great significance because it has an influence on diet, eating habits and physical image. Reporting certain content can help to foster healthy attitudes and behaviour. Conversely, incorrect coverage can contribute to the onset of these illnesses.

Media coverage of anorexia and bulimia nervosa should always foster a diversity of types (bodies, beauty, etc.) and emphasise the value of such diversity as an asset in itself.

The media also plays a significant role because it can disseminate more realistic body types, dispelling stereotypical images that might be bad for health and moving away from identifying and judging people merely on their appearance.

## 2. REGULATORY ASPECTS

Pursuant to the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989, States Parties and society must ensure the protection of the physical and mental health of children, especially protection from inducement of self-harm or conduct that is harmful to their health, such as internet content that advocates anorexia and bulimia nervosa, surpassing legal limits. Scientific studies on the impact of such content on children's health have demonstrated that it is highly dangerous and harmful.

Under Article 92.1(c) of Law 22/2005 of 29 December 2005 on audiovisual communications in Catalonia, advertising and teleshopping that encourages poor eating habits or other behaviour harmful to health is illegal. Article 96.1(a) states that advertising and teleshopping must not directly exploit children's gullibility or inexperience to persuade them to buy a product or a contract a service.

Article 18.3 of Spanish Law 7/2010 on general audiovisual communication prohibits commercial communication that encourages behaviour harmful to health. Furthermore, according to Article 7.2, no commercial communications that promote the cult of the body and the rejection of self-image or that encourage social rejection based on physical condition or success based on weight or looks are allowed before the watershed.

Regulation 1124/2006 of 20 December 2006 on the nutritional and health claims made on food products, sets down the composition criteria for food to be labelled as 'low calorie', 'reduced calorie', 'no added sugar' or 'fat free', among others.

Article 4.3 of Royal Decree 1430/1997 of 15 September 1997 approving the specific technical and health regulation of food products to be used in low-calorie diets for weight loss, amended by Royal Decree 886/2008 of 23 May 2008, states that no reference must be made in the labelling, advertising and presentation of such products to the potential rate or extent of weight loss as a result of consuming those products.

### 3. ADVERTISING GUIDELINES

Advertising deserves particular attention because it is the most strictly regulated area, has considerable impact on eating habits, and often sends out contradictory messages: on the one hand images of very thin women, and on the other adverts for junk food.

The guidelines for this area are as follows:

a) Given that some advertising is institutional, institutions must take **special care to portray a range of beauty and body types in their campaigns.**

b) **Advertising for weight loss products** (satiating, dietary, restrictive, limiting, blocking, replacement or control) **must be clear and not confusing**, and must not **create false expectations** about weight loss. The same applies to special foods that may be used without caution or control to change the body, particularly muscle mass. Therefore, it is important to:

- Not present products as miracle foods.
- Not make false claims about their nutritional properties.
- Not present such products as 'essential' to a consumer's diet.
- Adverts for weight loss products should include a written or spoken warning stating

that if improperly used, these products can cause eating disorders and should be used under medical supervision.

c) **Adverts for weight loss products should not be broadcast before the watershed**, bearing in mind that they can cause confusion among children and adolescents. Likewise, it is important to take into account the potential copycat effect of some types of behaviour, and therefore:

- Avoid promoting slimming diets without information about the related health risks.
- Promote healthy lifestyles and eating habits, dispelling myths about food, diet and figure.

d) **Before the watershed, no adverts for cosmetic surgery or treatments should be broadcast.** Moreover, sugary, fatty or salty products (sweets, snacks, drinks, etc.) must not be advertised as substitutes for regular meals, especially when aimed at children and adolescents.

e) **After the watershed, it is important to avoid advertising goods or services aimed at weight loss that:**

- Could lead to harmful behaviour or be harmful to health, or that contain unnecessary nutritional supplements.
- Induce consumption of unhealthy foods or do not clearly explain the way in which weight would be lost.
- Imply a link between the properties of the products advertised and the prestige of the actors or presenters endorsing them.

f) **Advertising should avoid glorifying beauty based on extreme thinness** that may indirectly lead to behaviour harmful to health. Rigorous coverage entails not equating eating disorders to extremely low weight.

## 4. GUIDELINES ON PRODUCING AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT

Bearing in mind their social responsibility, public and private audiovisual content producers should be particularly sensitive when it comes to addressing eating disorders.

One very important aspect of the role that the media can play is to avoid the spread of eating disorder myths such as:

- Eating disorders only affect women.
- Eating disorders are a lifestyle.
- You can tell just by looking at someone if they have an eating disorder.
- People who have an eating disorder are trying to look like the celebrities they idolise.

- They are a teenage fad that will pass with time.
- Families are responsible for their children having an eating disorder.

It is essential to take into account the variability of these disorders and their development. Not all eating disorders can be identified from a person's physical state; in most cases, the latent symptoms are not visible and the person has the illness in secret. Although there is not severe physical deterioration in all cases, patients do have issues of social adjustment and high levels of psychological distress.

## 4.1. Radio and television content

Beyond the portrayal of eating disorders in specific programme types, there are several general guidelines that apply to all broadcast content. These are as follows:

a) It is crucial that **people who appear in the media have a healthy and realistic physical appearance**, be they fat, thin, tall, short, etc. **Physical diversity should be fostered; uniformity and aesthetic stereotypes** that prize thinness should be avoided. Therefore, the media should:

- Show and attach importance to intellectual and psychological traits rather than merely physical ones.
- Make a clear distinction between beauty and health.

b) Situations must be presented that promote **healthy habits as a result of a good diet**. Any incitement to consumption that could damage health should be shown alongside responsible and critical behaviour or examples of the consequences of unhealthy habits and attitudes.

c) **People who have an eating disorder and their situation must be described with words and expressions that portray them with dignity**. It is therefore important to:

- Refer to the individual rather than describing them as their illness, wherever possible. Avoid generalisations such as 'anorexics are...' and instead use sentences like 'anorexia is characterised by...'
- Avoid using discriminatory language or terms that entail generic prejudices when discussing eating disorders. Although eating disorders primarily affect girls, boys are increasingly affected, so they should not be generalised or regarded as illnesses exclusive to women. It is also important to avoid treating these illnesses as rare or isolated.
- Do not refer to patients condescendingly.

d) **Avoid diets being a part of programmes aimed at under-18s**. In adult programmes, diets must be backed by doctors and dieticians and be part of clearly identified health content. **Diets endorsed by non-expert celebrities or 'gurus'** who recommend miracle diets or unusual or unknown foods should be avoided.

e) Good broadcasting media content would include, as part of a prevention programme,

**members of a family eating together at least once a day, having a balanced and healthy diet**, a formal meal (i.e. at a properly laid table), and in a relaxed, calm and pleasant atmosphere.

f) Bearing in mind the added value of images on television, it is important to **avoid images that show only the emaciated bodies of girls who have anorexia or bulimia nervosa**, as these illnesses do not only have physical but also psychological consequences.

g) **With regard to radio**, given that the only output is audio, special care must be taken in using accurate language and the right vocabulary, **particularly to avoid creating misleading or confusing mental images**.

h) Depending on their size and capacity, media companies should facilitate and **encourage training for anyone working on issues related to eating disorders**, in particular anorexia and bulimia nervosa.

### 4.1.1 Informative content

News programmes purport to tell media users the truth. Therefore, precautions must be taken when reporting eating disorders in various news formats. The guidelines are to:

a) **Diversify sources of information and seek advice from accredited professionals** (who have qualifications and experience, specialise in eating disorders, and treat and have contact with children and adolescents, etc.). It is essential to consult health specialists (psychology, psychiatry, dietary, etc.) or social specialists (sociology, education, social education, etc.) who are in direct contact with eating disorders. Another source of information are people who have or have had these illnesses, or their relatives.

b) **Anorexia and bulimia nervosa must be explained in context**, along with the symptoms, treatment and possible consequences. **Avoid simplifying, trivialising and decontextualizing the illness**.

c) For illnesses regarded as eating disorders, **avoid sensationalism and morbid details**, both in form (e.g. by showing only images of extremely thin girls or close-ups of food) and content (the verbal message).

d) Eating disorders should be dealt with as something to be avoided. That entails being very careful with the type of information provided, since information can have the opposite effect to what is intended. It could be dangerous to people regarded as at risk. Therefore, we recommend:

- **Not mentioning the names of any drugs used to lose weight or change the body** such as laxatives, purgatives, diuretics, protein supplements, and so on.
- **Not giving internet addresses for 'pro Ana' or 'pro Mia' websites** (short for pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia), which are mainly aimed at women and promote behaviour

related to eating disorders.

- **Not giving tips or methods to lose weight or for any kind of diet.**
- **Providing information and helplines** for associations and private and public centres that specialise in eating disorders and can give support to patients and relatives.

e) **Respecting the right to privacy of people who have an eating disorder and their families**, complying with the code of ethics of professional journalists in Catalonia. It is therefore necessary to **ask permission** from those affected before using any images that may compromise their right to privacy or personal portrayal. Hidden cameras must never be used to obtain statements from people affected. With regard to minors, disseminating any information or image from which a child can be identified, with or without the consent of the parents or guardians, that may affect the child's honour, privacy or personal portrayal, is prohibited.

### 4.1.2. Fictional content

Fictional plots and characters produced in house can be used to address eating disorders from an educational perspective. In this area, we recommend:

a) **Reinforcing the documentation phase of the script-writing and consulting experts in anorexia and bulimia nervosa.** If one of the characters has an eating disorder, be particularly careful about the copycat effect: present it as a serious illness that can be treated by an interdisciplinary medical team. In any event, it is important to portray the development of the illness properly and completely as much as possible.

b) **Shun the stereotypical** image of beauty as extremely thin **and archetypes** in which the main character is slim, slender, tall and beautiful, and the sidekick, usually the best friend or confidant, is fat, short and ugly.

### 4.2. Internet content

Information and communications technologies provide an opportunity to promote healthy attitudes and behaviour related to eating disorders. However, there are also websites that promote risk behaviour, known as 'pro Mia' and 'pro Ana' sites.

Therefore, we recommend that **web hosting services and moderators on blogs, chats and forums be careful and sensitive to any content advocating eating disorders or encouraging people to develop an eating disorder.**

## 5. OTHER GUIDELINES

a) **Parents are responsible for their children's education and should therefore**



**encourage critical thinking about the mass media, particularly the aesthetic ideals of extreme thinness in children, adolescents and young people, as they are regarded as a risk group.**

**b) People who have an eating disorder and their families, as well as professional associations that work with eating disorders, should report to the competent authorities any inappropriate media coverage of the illness or related abuse in advertising or the media.**

**c) The media itself should encourage self-regulation** and create bodies or mechanisms to ensure the quality of media coverage of anorexia and bulimia nervosa. In relation to this, we recommend **adopting specific codes of conduct** for broadcasting professionals on covering eating disorders, and/or drawing up specific style criteria for the media company or group, to minimise the effect of stereotypes and aesthetic ideals of thinness portrayed in some audiovisual content.

## Where can complaints regarding harmful and dangerous conduct to health in advertising or broadcast content be sent?:

- To the **Catalan Audiovisual Council Audience Protection**. Users of the broadcast media can contact the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC) to make complaints, opinions, suggestions and queries about any radio or television programme or advert, on public and private channels.

Link: [www.cac.cat](http://www.cac.cat), section “Audience Protection”.

- To the **Department of Health**. Ring the **Catalan health service helpline on 061**, write an email to [061catsalutrespon@gencat.cat](mailto:061catsalutrespon@gencat.cat), or use this [form](#).

- To the **Associació contra l’Anorèxia i la Bulímia (Anorexia and Bulimia Association) (ACAB)** via their [Online query](#)”

# Organisations, associations and institutions

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## **These guidelines have been drawn up by:**

Department of Health, Government of Catalonia

Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya (Catalan Audiovisual Council)

## **Entitats consultades:**

Associació contra l'Anorèxia i la Bulímia (ACAB) (Anorexia and Bulimia Association)

Associació Catalana de Concessionaris Privats de TDT Local (Catalan Private Local DTT Concessionaires Association)

Associació Catalana de Ràdio (Catalan Radio Association)

Associació de Mitjans de Proximitat (Local Media Association)

Associació d'Usuaris de la Comunicació (AUC) (Communication Users Association)

Associació Empresarial de Publicitat (Advertising Business Association)

Col·legi de Publicitaris i Relacions Públiques de Catalunya (Catalan Society of Advertising and PR)

Col·legi Professional de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya (Catalan Society of Broadcasting)

Col·legi de Periodistes de Catalunya (Catalan Society of Journalists)

Consell de la Informació de Catalunya (Catalan Information Council)

Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (Catalan Broadcasting Corporation)

Emissions Digitals de Catalunya

Federació de Mitjans de Comunicació Locals de Catalunya (Catalan Local Media Federation)

Fòrum d'entitats de persones usuàries de l'audiovisual (Forum for Audiovisual Users Organisations)

Fundació Institut de Trastorns Alimentaris (FITA) (Institute for Eating Disorders Foundation)

Sindicat de Periodistes de Catalunya (Catalan Journalists Union)

Taula de Diàleg per a la prevenció dels trastorns del comportament alimentari (Round table for the prevention of eating disorders)

Telespectadors Associats de Catalunya (TAC) (Associated Television Viewers of Catalonia)

Xarxa Audiovisual Local - La Xarxa (Local Broadcasting Network)



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