

“LET’S NOURISH OURSELVES WITH WELL-BEING”: A PROGRAM OF INTEGRATED INTERVENTIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF EATING DISORDERS AMONG 11-13 YEARS OLD ADOLESCENTS

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Background: Eating disorders (EAs) represent a significant public health problem, given the growing incidence and increasingly early onset among the youngest. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered or further exacerbated these disorders, especially in adolescents. Given the EAs multifactorial nature, it is important to combine universal prevention approaches, which act on strengthening protective factors, with selective and indicated prevention interventions, specifically aimed at subjects at greater risk of developing EAs. EAs screening allows an early identification of these people in order to start treatment more quickly and improve prognosis, but also to promote socio-emotional strengthening for those who are not yet in pathological conditions. Meyer Children’s Hospital IRCCS jointed efforts with the Local Health Authority and proposed to implement in a pilot district of the Municipality of Florence a program of integrated interventions aimed at contrasting EAs among 11-13 years old adolescents, involving families, schools, sport associations and the family paediatricians of the pilot district.

Methods and Objectives: The program “Let’s nourish ourselves with well-being” will use universal, selective and indicated prevention actions, in continuity with the existing care pathways at the territorial and hospital level, and it will aim at reducing the risk of EAs among 11-13 years old adolescents by strengthening their positive resources as protective factors, early identifying EA cases through screening in the middle schools and increasing early care starting from first level services. The study aiming to evaluate the program impact has a prospective controlled quasi-experimental interventional design, with an intervention group (consisting of around 2.500 students from all middle schools in the pilot district involved in the program) and a control group (consisting of students from other schools of the same level in other district of Florence).

Results: The first results will be available in October 2024 after the baseline survey that will be carried out before the start of universal prevention interventions. The post-intervention survey will be carried out at the end of the school year, with a follow-up at 3 months and at one year using similar surveys in order to verify the effects of the program in the medium term.

Conclusions: This program of integrated interventions may represent a model of community health promotion approach that strengthens awareness and the level of attention on EAs of reference adults, enhances the adolescents’ skills to deal with the difficulties underlying the same EAs and advances the recognition and treatment of EAs. The study aims to verify its impact in the face of a significant commitment of coordination and continuity put into play by the various actors involved, to evaluate the results and the opportunity to replicate it.

Keywords: eating disorders, adolescents, universal, selective and indicated prevention, screening and early intervention, community health promotion