More young people are being admitted to hospital because of eating disorders, with recent media reports (link is external) noting that the number has almost doubled in three years. The rise could be down to a range of factors, but among the leading suspects are pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites.

Exposure to pro-anorexia ('pro-ana') and pro-bulimia ('pro-mia') sites are often cited as creating an increased risk of developing eating disorders.[1]

A young person who feels unhappy about their body or think they may have symptoms of anorexia can type 'anorexia' into a search engine and stumble across a website that promotes the illness as a lifestyle. The websites encourage extreme thinness through web pages filled with reams of images showing emaciated and unhealthily thin women, known as 'thinspiration' or 'thinspo'.

The persuasive tone of the written content of these sites, on top of media images showing unrealistically thin bodies, can be very harmful. The sites offer rules and tips on how to adopt an 'ana' or 'mia' lifestyle and are particularly damaging to people already suffering from eating disorders, as they can further fuel an already distorted mind-set in relation to eating, body image and weight.[2]

These sorts of websites also have a presence on other social media and sharing platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr.

The UK government has previously expressed concern over the sites, but as yet no official legislation has been passed. France recently clamped down on them. As of April 2015, people who run pro-anorexia or bulimia sites or actively promote extreme thinness in France will now face a prison sentence and a fine of up to €10,000 (£7,333)[3] although it's doubtful how effective a solution this is, as some of the creators of these sites may well be mentally ill. It does suggest, though, that the French government sees this as a very serious problem.

What can you do?

Reporting these sites often has little effect, as creators place disclaimers on the site. These effectively provide a loophole to prevent them being shut down. If they were forced to close, it's probable those behind them will simply create a new website elsewhere, moving their content across.

What you can do is to be aware of these kinds of toxic sites:

- Decent quality filters should block most of them, but do check. If some are slipping through the net, you can blacklist particular websites as one of the options on the filtering software.
- Talk to your child about what they get up to online and remind them to always tell you if they find something on the web that makes them feel unhappy or uncomfortable. Reassure them you won't be angry with them when they tell you.
- If you see that your child has been visiting these sorts of sites or becoming obsessed with images online, speak to them about it. Starting a conversation with them is the best way to determine how much of an effect they might be having, and if you need to take further steps to help them.

If you think your child may be having disordered thoughts about eating and body image, or you've noticed some of the warning signs or symptoms listed on our other articles, it's important to talk to them or book an appointment with your GP.

Footnote:

[1] http://www.inourhands.com/free-resources/

[2] http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/inside-the-world-of-anorexia-blogging/

[3] http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/people-running-thinspiration-or-proanorexia-websites-in-france-will-now-face-a-prison-sentence-and-maximum-7000-fine-10153909.html