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What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa is a psychological condition where individuals restrict food in order to lose weight. This behavior can get out of control and result in extreme weight loss. Most people with anorexia have a distorted view of their body as fat, no matter how thin they are. People with anorexia are often unusually sensitive about being perceived as fat and are terrified of gaining weight. Common symptoms of anorexia include:

- excessive weight loss in a short period of time
- continued dieting, although already very thin
- unusual interest in food or food rituals
- eating very little and slowly
- obsession with exercise

They may develop unusual eating rituals such as weighing food, cutting up foods into small pieces, or refusing to eat in front of other people. It is not uncommon for people with anorexia to collect recipes and prepare elaborate meals for family and friends, but not eat any of the meal themselves.

There are two types of anorexia. Most people know the *restricting type*, where individuals diet, fast, or excessively exercise in order to lose weight. The other type is the *binge eating/purging type*, where individuals eat a large amount of food in a short period of time (binge) and/or purge, e.g., vomiting or using laxatives. Although people with bulimia will also often binge and purge, they maintain a normal or above normal weight, while people with anorexia have weight below normal.

Who suffers from anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia affects people from all ethnic and cultural groups. Most individuals with anorexia are young women, but anorexia can also be found in older women, girls, men, and boys. Estimates are that 10 percent of people with anorexia are male.

What causes anorexia nervosa?

It is not known what causes anorexia nervosa, but it is influenced by a number of factors. These factors include family and peer pressures, chemical imbalances, genetics, and emotional problems. Images of “ideal bodies” in the media often lead to unrealistic and unattainable body shape and weight goals. Individuals involved in gymnastics, ballet, wrestling, or other sports that stress low body weight may be at increased risk. Also, positive events (like beginning college) or negative events (like a loss in the family) can trigger anorexia. People with anorexia often suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of helplessness. Many with anorexia are perfectionists and have a strong desire to be in control. They often set unrealistic goals for themselves.

Why is it important to seek treatment for anorexia nervosa?

Many people with anorexia nervosa never seek treatment. However, anorexia rarely goes away by itself. If untreated, the disorder can lead to serious health problems. Severe restriction of food can have dangerous effects on the body, particularly the heart, brain, and bones.

The heart can weaken and serious heart problems can develop. The brain can shrink and cause changes in personality and the bones can lose calcium, making them weak and more likely to break. Taking vitamins, calcium, or other supplements does not protect from malnutrition. Anorexia is also associated with other psychological disorders like depression and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

Other problems may develop as a result of anorexia, including extreme sensitivity to cold, weak/brittle nails, a grayish appearance, hair loss, and growth of fine hair on the arms, face, shoulders, and back. Women with anorexia experience *amenorrhea* or the loss of menstrual periods. Men with anorexia can become impotent. It is possible to die from anorexia. Between 5 to 10 percent of people with anorexia eventually die from the illness, either by cardiac-related problems or suicide.

Does treatment really work?

Many people with anorexia can be treated successfully by psychologists, social workers, family therapists, and psychiatrists with experience in eating disorders, along with their personal physician. In many instances a team is involved in treatment, including dietitians and case managers. In some cases of severe malnutrition, a hospital stay may be necessary. Treatment can be difficult and require hard work from the patient and the family.

Treatment for anorexia may include a combination of individual and/or group psychotherapy, nutritional counseling, medications, and family education. Family or couples therapy may be a part of the treatment plan.

Therapists can guide family members in understanding anorexia and learning new techniques for coping with problems. The treatment is most successful if the problem is recognized early.

What can you do if you have anorexia nervosa?

Recognizing that you have a problem is the first step to getting better.

- *Seek professional help.* Talk with your personal physician, behavioral medicine specialist, or psychiatry department.
- *Set realistic goals.* Remember to be proud of every success no matter how small.
- *Be patient.* Setbacks are part of recovery.
- *Don't let the scale run your life.* The numbers on the scale don't reflect your self-worth.

How can you help someone with anorexia nervosa?

- Educate yourself about anorexia nervosa.
- Let them know that you care and you want to help.
- Don't pressure them about eating or talk about weight or food.
- Encourage them to seek professional help.
- Be patient. It is more than a matter of eating.
- Be prepared. They may deny the problem, get angry or refuse help.
- Remember that you can only do so much. Your comments may help them seek treatment in the future.

Recommended Reading

Anorexia Nervosa: A Guide to Recovery, L. Hall and M. Ostroff, Gurze Designs

and Books. ISBN: 0936077328

Anorexia Nervosa: When Food is the Enemy, E. Smith, Hazelden Information Education. ISBN: 1568382561

Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends, M. Siegel and J. Brisman, Harper-Collins, 1997 ISBN: 0060952334.

Recommended Web sites

American Anorexia/Bulimia Association (AABA)

www.aabainc.org

Something Fishy

www.something-fishy.org

When to call Kaiser Permanente

Call your doctor if you recognize any of these warning signs of anorexia nervosa:

- using body weight as a primary measure of self-worth
- having an extreme dissatisfaction with body image
- weight loss to less than 85 percent of healthy body weight
- odd food rituals, such as counting bites, cutting food into tiny pieces, etc.
- exercising excessively
- withdrawing from family and friends
- frequent dieting or restricting of food
- fainting, irregular pulse, or seizures

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.