

Identifying the Problem

Eating disorders represent some of the most complex health threats facing people today. The more doctors learn about these illnesses, the more they realize how important it is for people to be able to recognize their signs and symptoms. Anorexia is perhaps the most familiar eating disorder, although there is much confusion about exactly what it is and how it affects the mind and body. With this brief overview of what we know about anorexia, you can become better able to spot its symptoms and respond to a concern in an appropriate way.

Similar Diseases

Experts have identified several different eating disorders, but they share many of the same external features. A preoccupation with weight gain and a discomfort about eating or talking about food are two of the most notable features of eating disorders. However, other diseases, like binge eating and bulimia, have different root causes and effects than anorexia.



There is a danger in jumping to the conclusion that anorexia is the disease responsible for an illness. While anorexic behavior damages the body's organs and leads to a number of serious complications, there are plenty of other diseases that can have the same results. Because of the secretive nature of the disease, confrontation may cause more harm than good. A complete check by a physician can identify whether an eating disorder is to blame or another serious health risk is present. Working with a qualified health care professional is the only way to effectively diagnose and treat anorexia.

Definition

Anorexia is a person's refusal to maintain a normal body weight, because of a distorted body image and/or an intense fear of gaining weight. There are many signs to look for if you suspect someone is suffering from anorexia.

Working with a qualified health care professional is **the only way** to effectively diagnose and treat anorexia.

LEARN MORE

Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.

National Eating Disorders Association

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc.

www.anad.org

ANOREXIA



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Fear of Weight Gain

Anorexia causes its victims to fear weight gain to an unreasonable and unhealthy degree. Even when they are within their normal weight range or below it, they worry that they will become overweight if they don't take action to prevent it. This fear prompts them to severely restrict their diet and exercise excessively in an attempt to rapidly lose weight.

Incorrect Self Perception

While everyone else can see that an anorexic person is abnormally thin and unhealthy, they see themselves as "fat" or in immediate danger of becoming obese. This dread is a trick that the mind plays on the person; after years of worrying about weight and buying into the popular obsession with certain "ideal" body types, the mind becomes impossible to satisfy and continues to demand drastic weight-loss behavior.

Physical and Behavioral Symptoms

Aside from the main traits regarding fear of weight gain and self-perception, there are other signs to look out for too.

Physical symptoms include: fatigue, dizziness/fainting, thinning hair, dry skin, dehydration, and swelling of extremities.

Behaviors associated with anorexia include: refusal to eat, denial of hunger, lying about eating, social withdrawal, irritability, and unnecessary use of laxatives or other diet aids.

Causes

There are multiple possible causes, and each case is unique, but many experts point to popular stereotypes as a leading factor in anorexic behavior in young people. Because many of these stereotypes are focused on women, young girls experience anorexia far more often than boys do.

Anorexia may also be the result of psychological factors. When a person faces emotional struggles such as depression or low self-esteem, they often look for something to control, like their weight. This focus can result in an unhealthy obsession, where losing weight changes from being a solution to a self-destructive problem.

Effects

The mental effects of anorexia are serious and long-lasting. It takes years of therapy and mental discipline to rid oneself of the incorrect perspectives and self-perceptions that are central to anorexia. The physical effects, however, are more immediately dangerous. Some anorexic people reduce their caloric intake so drastically that they starve their own body of the nutrients that it needs to function normally. In the most dramatic cases, anorexic people have actually starved to death.

The physical and mental effects of anorexia can last a lifetime.

Even when anorexia does not result in death, it usually damages organs to the point that may never fully

recover. The heart and brain are the most important organs weakened by anorexia, mainly because insufficient nutrition lowers blood pressure and nutrient balance. The damage can last a lifetime, even after the anorexia has been treated.

Solutions

The good news is that most anorexic people are able to beat their disorder. The chances of overcoming anorexia are much greater the earlier it is diagnosed and treated. A few basic steps can help eliminate this dangerous influence before it becomes too strong to handle.

Healthy, Safe Family Environment

When parents and kids feel free to communicate openly, they are less likely to keep secrets from each other. In a safe family environment, one can discuss the thoughts and influences that lead toward anorexic behavior. Reasoning through these issues helps establish correct thinking patterns and prevents obsessive thoughts.

Alertness to Symptoms

Don't close your eyes to the signs of anorexia in those you love. Preoccupation with figure or weight, discomfort or strange habits concerning food, and a dangerously underweight appearance are all warning signs of an eating disorder. In the right context, a parent or other authority can help steer someone toward help instead of allowing the disorder to continue to do damage.

Control Body Image Influences

The best way to avoid anorexia is to have a balanced, healthy view of one's own body. Don't force yourself to conform to someone else's idea of what is

beautiful; instead, develop confidence in who you are. Surround yourself with friends who uplift and encourage you, not those who make negative comments and make you feel bad about yourself. As a parent, you can influence your child's body image through your words, actions, involvement, and own self-perceptions. How you see yourself makes a difference in how a child sees him or herself.

Reversing Anorexia

Therapy is the leading method of helping people overcome anorexia. When the mind changes the way it thinks about the body, it stops dictating unhealthy behaviors and helps the body develop balance. Of course, a strong support system at home and at school is essential to maximize the effects of therapy.

When anorexia proceeds to the point of creating medical emergencies, the priority becomes getting the body back to good health. Only when physical health is stabilized, can more permanent solutions begin.

Be on the lookout for yourself, friends and family. Speak up if you suspect something, but remember that anorexia is an emotional disease that can't be solved overnight. There is no guaranteed way to prevent anorexia, but having a strong support system is a great start.

