

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder which based on a terrifying fear of becoming fat. But it is far more complex than a simple desire to lose weight.

What to look for

- significant weight loss.
- fear of becoming fat, even when emaciated.
- excessive dieting and exercising
- distorted body image.
- abnormal food preoccupations, such as counting all calories or obsessively studying cookbooks.
- constipation.
- dry, sallow skin.
- increase in facial and body hair; loss of some head hair.
- cessation of menstrual periods.
- suppression of sexual desire.
- hands and feet cold at normal room temperature.
- chronic insomnia
- bad school results, the committing of anti-social behaviour - stealing, becoming noticeably withdrawn and destroying things.

Anorexics starve themselves as a result of the fear of gaining weight which results in major weight loss... in addition to emaciation, under-nourishment, anaemia, irregular heartbeat, brittle bones, and many other problems.

Anorexia is dangerous, and professional help should be sought early on. Prompt treatment will usually keep the condition from progressing, but some cases are very resistant to treatment and may require hospitalisation.

Although its focus is on food, anorexia is an illness of the mind. Often it begins with a relatively normal desire to lose a few pounds. But it soon becomes compulsive. Food intake is gradually minimised until eating is almost eliminated. The victim becomes obsessed with his/her body image and frequently sees herself as fat even though she is not over weight.

Ironically, she ritualises food preparation and consumption. She becomes obsessed with recipes and cooking yet will not eat the food herself. She may alternate fasting with periodic bingeing and purging (see Bulimia), particularly when she is trying to regain normal eating habits.

Anorexics tend to come from families that have high standards of achievement, and they are often perfectionists, compulsive in many aspects of their life, especially school.

Denial often accompanies their intense focus on remaining thin. Anorexics will typically refuse to admit that anything is wrong, and they become angry or defensive at expressions of concern by others.

CAUSES

While some studies indicate that genes can play a predisposing role in anorexia, most researchers believe that psychological factors are key.

Anorexics tend to have low self-esteem and feel undeserving of love. In adolescence, such feelings may be reinforced by sexual changes, fear of growing up, cultural messages that portray thin as beautiful, and pressures or tensions within the family. Extreme fasting may be an anorexic's way of attempting to exert control over her life.

Traditional Treatment

Families should call for medical assistance straight away in order to increase the weight to a safer level. Then psychotherapy, regular medical monitoring, and nutritional guidance should be the other part of any treatment program for anorexia.

Close cooperation among all health professionals involved is important. All these professionals should be experienced specifically in treating eating disorders.

Hospitalisation is usually necessary if the patient has lost more than 25 percent of normal body weight. A system of coaxing the patient to eat is usually set into place as the patient will avoid eating at all costs.

Psychotherapy is the main treatment to attempt to unravel to causes of the individuals problems and difficulties.

Supplements of zinc sulfate will aid any zinc deficiencies. Other nutritional supplements, appetite enhancers, antidepressants, and anti-anxiety drugs are often prescribed as well.

Alternative/Natural Treatments

Alternative therapies may help with some of the symptoms of anorexia, and can serve as useful additions to treatments that address nutrition and the emotional roots of the disorder. It is thought that sufferers of this complaint, have zinc deficiencies and this may be worth getting your doctor to look into.

When to seek further professional advice

If your child or person close to you engages in any of the symptoms mentioned above it is vitally important that you seek medical advice immediately.