What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa is a serious and potentially life-threatening mental illness. Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder defined by an inability to maintain one’s body weight within 15 percent of their Ideal Body Weight (IBW). Other essential features of this disorder include an intense fear of gaining weight, a distorted image of one’s body, denial of the seriousness of the illness, and—in females—amenorrhea, an absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles when they are otherwise expected to occur.

Who develops anorexia nervosa?

Like all eating disorders, anorexia nervosa tends to occur in adolescence, but can develop at any time throughout one’s lifetime. It predominately affects adolescent girls and young adult women, although it also occurs in boys, men, older women and younger girls. Others especially at risk for eating disorders include athletes, dancers and models for which thinness has become a “professional requirement.”

What are the common signs of anorexia nervosa?

The main symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa are a preoccupation with food and an inability to maintain normal body weight. One of the most frightening aspects of the disorder is that people with anorexia nervosa continue to think they “look fat” even when have become dangerously thin. Individuals with anorexia nervosa may develop odd and ritualistic eating habits such as cutting their food into tiny pieces, refusing to eat in front of others or fixing elaborate meals for others that they themselves don’t eat. In addition to decreasing their food and liquid intake, people with anorexia nervosa will often exercise excessively as another means of weight loss. They might also try increasing caffeine intake (to increase urination and water loss) or abusing laxatives as means of weight loss.

As people become thinner, their body starts to experience physical changes associated with malnutrition and starvation. Their nails and hair become brittle, their skin may become dry and yellow and they may grow fine hair (called lanugo) on parts of their body previously without hair. People with anorexia nervosa often complain of feeling cold as their body loses the ability to maintain its temperature. They may also report feeling tired, without energy, or unable to focus both due to their malnutrition and to the hormonal (e.g., thyroid) changes.

The starvation experienced by persons with anorexia nervosa can cause damage to vital organs such as the heart, kidneys and brain. Pulse rate and blood pressure drop, and people suffering from this illness may experience irregular heart rhythms or heart failure.

What are the causes of anorexia nervosa?
Scientists have studied the role of genetics, environment and biochemistry of people with anorexia nervosa. Although its precise cause remains unknown, scientists agree that it is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Eating disorders tend to run in families, with female relatives most commonly affected. Close relatives of a person with anorexia nervosa are more than 10 times more likely to have an eating disorder themselves than someone without this illness in their family. Scientific studies have shown that certain chemicals in the brain, specifically the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and serotonin, are not functioning optimally in patients with anorexia nervosa, something which can worsen in times of malnutrition and starvation.

What treatments are available for anorexia nervosa?

Recovery from anorexia nervosa is possible. In long term studies of people with this illness, about one-half fully recover, many have intermittent periods of recovery and relapse, and a small percentage continue to experience a more chronic form of anorexia nervosa with ongoing symptoms of this and other eating disorders.

Fortunately, most of the complications experienced by persons with anorexia nervosa are reversible when they restore their weight through engagement in treatment. People with this disorder should be diagnosed and treated as soon as possible because eating disorders are most successfully treated when diagnosed early. Some patients can be treated as outpatients, but others may need medical hospitalization to stabilize their dangerously low weight through “re-feeding” treatment. This may include the use of feeding tubes, intravenous fluids, and structured diets with supervised meals.

A variety of psychotherapeutic approaches are used to help people with anorexia nervosa. Individual therapy is a standard treatment for this illness. Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) can help to teach coping skills and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be used to change unhealthy thoughts and behaviors. Group therapy is often advised to create a safe environment where people can share their experiences with others. Family therapy is important—particularly if the individual is living at home and is a child or young adolescent—and is specifically useful in mobilizing family support for this complex illness.

Unfortunately there is no medication that can cure anorexia nervosa. In general, certain psychiatric medications may be useful in treating isolated symptoms of anorexia nervosa. Families and friends can be most helpful in encouraging their loved ones to seek treatment for this complex mental illness. With coordinated treatment and the support of family and friends, most people with Anorexia Nervosa can expect to see a decrease in their symptoms as they go on to live meaningful lives.

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