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ANOREXIA NERVOSA

What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa is an illness that usually occurs in teenage girls, but it can also occur in teenage boys, and adult women and men. People with anorexia are obsessed with being thin. They lose a lot of weight and are terrified of gaining weight. They believe they are fat even though they are very thin. Anorexia isn't just a problem with food or weight. It's an attempt to use food and weight to deal with emotional problems.

What is the difference between anorexia and bulimia?

People with anorexia starve themselves, avoid high-calorie foods and exercise constantly. People with bulimia eat huge amounts of food, but they throw up soon after eating, or take laxatives or diuretics (water pills) to keep from gaining weight. People with bulimia don't usually lose as much weight as people with anorexia.

Why do people get anorexia?

The reason some people get anorexia isn't known. People with anorexia may believe they would be happier and more successful if they were thin. They want everything in their lives to be perfect. People who have this disorder are usually good students. They are involved in many school and community activities. They blame themselves if they don't get perfect grades, or if other things in life are not perfect.

What are the problems caused by anorexia?

Girls with anorexia usually stop having menstrual periods. People with anorexia have dry skin and thinning hair on the head. They may have a growth of fine hair all over their body. They may feel cold all the time, and they may get sick often. People with anorexia are often in a bad mood. They have a hard time concentrating and are always thinking about food. It is not true that anorexics are never hungry. Actually, they are always hungry. Feeling hunger gives them a feeling of control over their lives and their bodies. It makes them feel like they are good at something--they are good at losing weight. People with severe anorexia may be at risk of death from starvation.

What is the treatment for anorexia?

Treatment of anorexia is difficult, because people with anorexia believe there is nothing wrong with them. Patients in the early stages of anorexia (less than 6 months or with just a small amount of weight loss) may be successfully treated without having to be admitted to the hospital. But for successful treatment, patients must want to change and must have family and friends to help them.

People with more serious anorexia need care in the hospital, usually in a special unit for people with anorexia and bulimia. Treatment involves more than changing the person's eating habits. Anorexic patients often need counseling for a year or more so they can work on changing the feelings that are causing their eating problems. These feelings may be about their weight, their family problems or their problems with self-esteem. Some anorexic patients are helped by taking medicine that makes them feel less depressed. These medicines are prescribed by a doctor and are used along with counseling.

How can family and friends help?

The most important thing that family and friends can do to help a person with anorexia is to love them. People with anorexia feel safe, secure and comfortable with their illness. Their biggest fear is gaining weight, and gaining weight is seen as loss of control. They may deny they have a problem. People with anorexia will beg and lie to avoid eating and gaining weight, which is like giving up the illness. Family and friends should not give in to the pleading of the anorexic patient.