Anorexia nervosa

Anorexia nervosa is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss. According to the National Eating Disorder Association, approximately 90-95 percent sufferers are girls and women. Anorexia nervosa is the most common psychiatric diagnosis in young women and typically appears in early to mid-adolescence.

Symptoms

- Inadequate food intake leading to a weight that is clearly too low.
- Intense fear of weight gain, obsession with weight and persistent behavior to prevent weight gain.
- Self-esteem overly related to body image.
- Inability to appreciate the severity of the situation.
- Binge eating and/or purging behaviors during the last three months

Warning signs

- Dramatic weight loss.
- Preoccupation with weight, food, calories, fat grams, and dieting.
- Refusal to eat certain foods, progressing to restrictions against whole categories of food (e.g. no carbohydrates, etc.).
- Frequent comments about feeling “fat” or overweight despite weight loss.
- Anxiety about gaining weight or being “fat.”
- Denial of hunger.
- Development of food rituals (e.g. eating foods in certain orders, excessive chewing, rearranging food on a plate).
- Consistent excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations involving food.
- Excessive, rigid exercise regimen—despite weather, fatigue, illness, or injury, the need to “burn off” calories taken in.
- Withdrawal from usual friends and activities.
- In general, behaviors and attitudes indicating that weight loss, dieting, and control of food are becoming primary concerns.

Health consequences of anorexia nervosa

When the body is denied the essential nutrients it needs to function normally, it is forced to slow down all of its processes to conserve energy. This “slowing down” can have serious medical consequences:

- Abnormally slow heart rate and low blood pressure, which mean that the heart muscle is changing. The risk for heart failure rises as heart rate and blood pressure levels sink lower and lower.
- Reduction of bone density (osteoporosis), which results in dry, brittle bones.
- Muscle loss and weakness.

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• Severe dehydration, which can result in kidney failure.
• Fainting, fatigue, and overall weakness.
• Dry hair and skin, hair loss is common.
• Growth of a downy layer of hair called lanugo all over the body, including the face, in an effort to keep the body warm.

Actions you can take

Anorexia nervosa has one of the highest death rates of any mental health condition. If you are concerned about the behavior of a loved one and think they need to be hospitalized, adult or adolescent, call 859-226-7063 for adults and 800-776-COPE (2673) for adolescents.

UK HealthCare can offer you and your loved one the care and support needed to fight this disease.

Resources

UK Adolescent Behavioral Health
UK Good Samaritan Hospital (Inpatient care)
310 S. Limestone
Lexington
800-776-2673 (toll free) or 859-226-7060
Fax: 859-226-7064
ukhealthcare.uky.edu/behavioral-health/

UK Adolescent Medicine
Kentucky Clinic (Outpatient care)
Fourth floor, Wing D
740 S. Limestone
Lexington
859-323-5643
ukhealthcare.uky.edu/adolescent-medicine/

Additional resources:

National Institute of Mental Health
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 7C-02
Rockville, MD
301-443-4513
www.nimh.nih.gov

National Eating Disorders Association
165 West 46th Street
Suite 402
New York
800-931-2237
http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/