



Anorexia Nervosa



If someone you love appears to have anorexia nervosa, support them in seeking treatment.

Anorexia nervosa, or "loss of appetite due to nerves," is actually the denial or suppression of appetite, which results in self-starvation. It's a psychological disorder that can lead to a physically life-threatening situation.

CHARACTERISTICS

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by an obsession to be thin. As shocking as it sounds, people with the disorder refuse to eat, or eat only a few morsels of food despite becoming increasingly underweight. While anorexia nervosa can affect all types of people, adolescent girls and young women (ages 12 to 25) are the most typical sufferers. Experts estimate that one severe case occurs in every 250 young women over the age of 15. Victims may lose up to 25 percent of their original body weight. Often the person has a family history of psychological insecurity and highly self-critical perfectionism. To the outer world, however, she may appear to be a model child or young adult.

CAUSE

No one knows the cause of anorexia nervosa, but undoubtedly it has a strong psychological or component. Social pressure to be thin contributes to the development of the condition. Our society is peppered with such sayings as, "You can never be too thin or too rich." Feelings of guilt, depression and anxiety about not conforming to these beliefs only add to the problem. Lack of self-esteem in anorectics may also contribute to their feelings that they're not worthy to eat and be healthy.

PROGRESSION

Anorexia nervosa begins with dieting, which may occur as part of a major life change, such as moving, puberty or the loss of an important relationship. If the dieting is successful, the victim begins to feel in control of her life once again. To make the dieting even more successful, she may begin to exercise excessively.

Internal control becomes a substitute for feeling helpless over external situations. The fear of losing control then becomes transferred to a fear of gaining weight.

DANGERS

Permanent physiological damage can take place from anorexia nervosa, including damage to the heart, kidneys and brain. Danger signals include: hair, nail, or skin problems, overuse of laxatives, social isolation, extreme weight loss, excessive physical exercise, an abnormal attitude toward food and denial of the problem.

RECOVERY

Professional care is necessary to treat the disorder. If someone you love appears to have anorexia nervosa, support her in seeking treatment. Regular visits to a doctor and to a counselor are necessary. Typically, other family members should also be counseled. When treated early enough, normal health can be regained, and self-confidence accompanied by a realistic body image can return the individual to productive living.