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Anorexia Nervosa

Q: What is anorexia nervosa?

A: A person with anorexia nervosa (an-uh-RECK-see-uh nur-VOH-suh), often called anorexia, has an intense fear of gaining weight. Someone with anorexia thinks about food a lot and limits the food she or he eats, even though she or he is too thin. Anorexia is more than just a problem with food. It's a way of using food or starving oneself to feel



It was 6 months ago when I realized my daughter, Jen, had an eating disorder. Jen has always been a picky eater. But I started to see that she moved food around her plate.

And she never ate very much. She exercised all the time — even when she was sick. And she was sick a lot. She became very skinny and pale. Her hair thinned. Jen became moody and seemed sad — I thought that's what teens act like. But once I put the signs together, I talked to Jen about anorexia. She denied she had a problem. But I knew she needed help. I took her to our doctor, and she asked me to put Jen in the hospital. Jen's treatment helped her return to a normal weight. It's been a tough road since then for all of us, but Jen is back home now. She is still seeing her doctors, and may need help for some time. But she's doing much better.

more in control of life and to ease tension, anger, and anxiety. Most people with anorexia are female. An anorexic:

- Has a low body weight for her or his height
- Resists keeping a normal body weight
- Has an intense fear of gaining weight
- Thinks she or he is fat even when very thin
- Misses 3 menstrual periods in a row (for girls/women who have started having their periods)

Q: Who becomes anorexic?

A: While anorexia mostly affects girls and women (85 - 95 percent of anorexics are female), it can also affect boys and men. It was once thought that women of color were shielded from eating disorders by their cultures, which tend to be more accepting of different body sizes. It is not known for sure whether African American, Latina, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian and Alaska Native people develop eating disorders because American culture values thin people. People with different cultural backgrounds may develop eating disorders because it's hard to adapt to a new culture (a theory called "culture clash"). The stress of trying to live in two different cultures may cause some minorities to develop their eating disorders.

Q: What causes anorexia?

A: There is no single known cause of anorexia. Eating disorders are real, treatable medical illnesses with causes in both the body and the mind. Some of these things may play a part:



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- **Culture.** Women in the U.S. are under constant pressure to fit a certain ideal of beauty. Seeing images of flawless, thin females everywhere makes it hard for women to feel good about their bodies. More and more, men are also feeling pressure to have a perfect body.
- **Families.** If you have a mother or sister with anorexia, you are more likely to develop the disorder. Parents who think looks are important, diet themselves, or criticize their children's bodies are more likely to have a child with anorexia.
- **Life changes or stressful events.** Traumatic events (like rape) as well as stressful things (like starting a new job), can lead to the onset of anorexia.
- **Personality traits.** Someone with anorexia may not like her or himself, hate the way she or he looks, or feel hopeless. She or he often sets hard-to-reach goals for her or himself and tries to be perfect in every way.
- **Biology.** Genes, hormones, and chemicals in the brain may be factors in developing anorexia.

Q: What are signs of anorexia?

- A:** Someone with anorexia may look very thin. She or he may use extreme measures to lose weight by:
- Making her or himself throw up
 - Taking pills to urinate or have a bowel movement
 - Taking diet pills
 - Not eating or eating very little
 - Exercising a lot, even in bad weather or when hurt or tired
 - Weighing food and counting calories

- Eating very small amounts of only certain foods
- Moving food around the plate instead of eating it

Someone with anorexia may also have a distorted body image, shown by thinking she or he is fat, wearing baggy clothes, weighing her or himself many times a day, and fearing weight gain.

Anorexia can also cause someone to not act like her or himself. She or he may talk about weight and food all the time, not eat in front of others, be moody or sad, or not want to go out with friends. People with anorexia may also have other psychiatric and physical illnesses, including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Obsessive behavior
- Substance abuse
- Issues with the heart and/or brain
- Problems with physical development

Q: What happens to your body with anorexia?

A: With anorexia, your body doesn't get the energy from foods that it needs, so it slows down. Look at the picture below to find out how anorexia affects your health.

Q: Can someone with anorexia get better?

A: Yes. Someone with anorexia can get better. A health care team of doctors, nutritionists, and therapists will help the patient get better. They will:

- Help bring the person back to a normal weight

