Information about
Anorexia Nervosa in Children and Teens for Parents

What Is Anorexia Nervosa?
Anorexia nervosa is the most common eating disorder among girls entering puberty, although there is an increasing trend of adolescent boys developing this disorder; it is more common among younger than older boys, but only about 50% of patients are males. Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder that makes eating very distressing. People who struggle with this disorder become very anxious or obsessed with maintaining or reducing their body weight through rigid control and restriction of their caloric intake, and/or intensive exercise. These people have intense drive to lose weight and feel that their self-worth is directly affected by their body weight or shape.

What Are Common Signs and Symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa?
- Weight loss
- Dietary restriction
- Food rituals
- Avoiding public eating
- Frequent weighing
- Excessive focus on exercise or dieting
- Loss of menstrual periods
- Hair loss or growth of baby-fine hair on face or body
- Feeling cold much of the time
- Loss of menstrual periods/sterility
- Dehydration
- Kidney damage

How Can Anorexia Nervosa Affect Someone’s Health?
It can cause:
- Low blood pressure
- Low heart rate
- An inability to concentrate
- Fatigue/muscle weakness
- Irritability
- Constipation
- Loss of menstrual periods/sterility
- Dehydration
- Brittleness

What Causes Anorexia Nervosa?
Eating disorders have been called “brain circuit disorders” because there is emerging evidence that the way in which the brains of affected individuals respond to food, eating and body image is different, so that what is positive for most people is either threatening or overly rewarding for those with an eating disorder. Previously held beliefs that parents cause eating disorders have been definitively debunked. Eating disorders occur when several biological, psychological and social factors interact in a vulnerable individual. For many individuals, simple dieting may be the trigger to weight control becoming out-of-control. For those with anorexia nervosa, the desire to be thinner and to restrict their eating habits is constantly on their mind. Anorexia literally means to lose one’s appetite; however, people with anorexia nervosa do not truly lose their appetite. Instead, the fear of weight gain causes them to go on strict diets that may result in the inability to eat normally. People who struggle with anorexia nervosa feel driven to lose weight, and their desire to control their weight is tied to their self-worth. They often feel that eating is a sign of a lack of self-control.
Some people who develop anorexia nervosa may have emotional needs that are not being met in their lives. They may have difficulty in social relationships or have problems making friends. The development of anorexia nervosa is sometimes a physical way for adolescents to deal with overwhelming and emotional issues that can occur during the transition to adulthood. Still others develop anorexia nervosa in the face of puberty and the emergence of emotional tensions with family or peers. This may be related to concerns about their own normal body changes that occur with puberty, or an unpleasant social experience.

It is very common for teens with anorexia nervosa to be high achievers and perfectionists; however, they feel that they are underachievers. Frequently, people with anorexia nervosa set unrealistically high standards for themselves that are impossible to achieve or sustain. As a result, they are left with feelings of failure and inadequacy.

**What Are the Treatments for Anorexia Nervosa?**

Treatment for anorexia nervosa requires the restoration of nutritional intake to establish physical health upon which mental health treatment can succeed. Parents have a central role in family-based treatment models, which have been shown to be the most effective in resulting in recovery from anorexia nervosa. Medications, such as antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications, may be used along with intensive counseling, but food remains the most important “medicine” in the initial phase of treatment. Nutritional counseling by a trained specialist is often helpful. Adolescents with anorexia nervosa who have fasted for long periods often will not be able to eat normal amounts of food and will need to begin eating small amounts of food more often. The digestive tract of someone who has dieted extremely may have difficulty digesting certain foods until their system becomes used to eating more food. Some patients with anorexia nervosa require hospital admission if their weight loss is so extreme that the person’s health is poor (e.g., if their heart rate or blood pressure becomes too low), or the pattern of inadequate nutritional intake cannot be interrupted in intensive outpatient therapy.

**What Can You Do If You Think You Have Anorexia Nervosa?**

If you believe that you may have anorexia nervosa, you should seek professional help from your doctor or nurse practitioner right away. The longer that you have fixed patterns and attitudes toward eating, the more difficult it will be to begin to change those habits. It may feel very upsetting and scary for you to think of changing these habits.

Specialists will be able to offer you many suggestions, even if you are uncertain you would like to change things. Below are some suggestions that other people have said have been helpful to them:

- Find ways to pamper yourself that have nothing to do with food (perhaps something that you used to enjoy).
- Put your energy into different channels. Find activities that you are good at or that give you satisfaction, or do something to make someone else happy.
- Try to do what you want to do, not just what other people want you to do (or what you think other people would like you to do), at least some of the time.
- Focus on finding ways to like yourself that do not involve a “target weight” or anything to do with eating.
- Believe that you can overcome this problem and get the help you need to do it NOW!