

Anorexia nervosa in children and young people

What we should know as parents and what can we do to help?

What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder. The first thing many people notice is that the young person, usually a girl, eats less. Her eating habits change or she loses weight. But anorexia nervosa is much more than a problem with eating, it is a serious illness. Bulimia nervosa is another problem with eating that older teenage girls suffer. Their weight may not change a lot but they no longer eat normally. They may diet, binge and vomit in the same day. Other eating patterns such as not eating meals and excessive dieting are seen at times. Bad eating habits and too much exercise can be a problem in young men. However, as eating disorders are more frequent in young women, this fact sheet deals with the problem of anorexia nervosa and our daughters.

Why is anorexia nervosa dangerous?

Severe anorexia nervosa produces the same physical result as starvation. Along with weight loss and muscle wasting comes weakness, low energy and damage to organs such as the heart. Weight loss can lead to the loss of monthly periods (menstruation), which may lead to the inability to have children and osteoporosis (weak and easily broken bones). Perhaps most upsetting are the emotional and social effects anorexia nervosa has on the girls and young women who have the illness. Many will not want to do the things they used to do before. They may become worried by trying to be too good or perfect. They often become sad and depressed. Many miss parts of their education or become obsessed with school.


What can we do to protect our daughters from anorexia nervosa?

It is difficult for us to control the world around our family. Our teenage girls receive many different messages. They are encouraged in school to eat well, but television and advertising often encourage them to eat fast food. Almost all of their teenage role models are thin and judged on their looks. One of the most helpful things we can do is to set a good example by our own eating and dieting behaviour, and by the way we talk about the physical appearance of others. Constantly criticising our own appearance, or criticising our daughters for the way they look, gives them a bad example. It could influence them to start bad dieting behaviours, which might become a serious eating problem.

How can we tell that our daughters have an eating disorder?

There are several early warning signs of an eating disorder:

- It is important to look for dieting in girls and young women. Most doctors recommend that



it is dangerous for young women to be on weight loss diets. It is better for them to eat healthy meals and exercise regularly.

- Another early warning sign is a daughter who does not eat regular meals and her weight rapidly drops.
- Our daughter may also develop an eating disorder more gradually, starting with sensible eating habits and then avoiding more and more foods, especially dairy foods.
- You may be suspicious that she is vomiting after meals in an attempt to lose weight.
- Other warning signs include repetitive and secret exercise and wearing loose fitting clothes to hide weight loss.

How do we talk to our daughters about our worries?

It is usually good to approach our daughter in a gentle way, saying that we are worried about her health, and then tell her our worries about her eating. These could be things that we have noticed, such as looking tired and avoiding family meals. This is usually better than saying that we think she is becoming too thin. Talking only about weight usually turns into an argument about what the correct weight should be. Weight is also a difficult issue because we usually get praised if we look thinner. This can make it very difficult to stop dieting when a healthy weight is reached.

What can we do when our daughters need help and we don't have the answers?

If we have a family doctor who knows us well, the best approach is to discuss it with the doctor. Parents should also meet with the doctor, to explain concerns they have. Young women with anorexia nervosa will also need some time alone with the doctor. The doctor will want to examine our daughter and carry out some blood tests. This may be enough to stop the dieting if she realises that her health is at risk. If this is not enough, our daughter may need counselling, which can be provided by the local community health centre, a psychiatrist, an eating disorders service, or an adolescent medicine team. The local doctor should be able to advise us about appropriate services or the nearest Children's Hospital.

What do we do if our daughters refuse help?

Eating disorders can be very serious and at times life threatening. It is important to encourage our daughter to see somebody for help. This may mean finding outside support. It is important that the whole family supports us on this. If the family cannot persuade her to receive help we may need to go to other people, such as her school counsellor or family friends. Do not try to keep her happy by ignoring the behaviours, or by letting her negotiate with us so she does not get help. Eating disorders become more difficult to treat as they get more severe.

What can be done to help?

Most health professionals will try to treat young women with eating disorders by seeing them without being admitted to hospital. This is called Outpatient treatment. This type of treatment is most successful if the family is involved, including brothers and sisters. Treatment needs to include monitoring of weight and physical health.

Admission to hospital may be needed if our daughter is physically unwell, or if Outpatient treatment does not work. At this stage the young woman may be so starved that she is not thinking clearly and she may be difficult to talk to. She may need hospitalisation without her permission, if she is at risk of dying from starvation.

A collage of four photographs: a woman looking down, a baby in a hat, a young girl smiling, and a young boy smiling.

As a parent, how do I support treatment?

It is upsetting for families to support young women who are receiving treatment. Our daughters become very upset at the thought of returning to a normal or even safe weight. We, as sensitive and caring parents, may become upset even though we know that what is being done is life saving. It is important that we have regular family meetings with the health professional to be kept informed. We should expect our daughter to have difficulty co-operating with treatment initially. This is more common if she has been admitted to hospital. We will find that our daughter has many complaints about the staff in the hospital and the treatment that she is receiving. We may also be concerned that she is not receiving enough counselling. This will be because intensive counselling is of little use in the initial stages of refeeding. The staff will be spending most of the time explaining the treatment to her, and getting to know her. Individual counselling will be of more use as she recovers physically.

Recovery

Once a young woman has developed an eating disorder, especially one severe enough to need hospitalisation, she will take quite some time to recover. The first step is to regain a healthy weight. If this is achieved there is still some long-term work to be done to help our daughter to be happy at a normal weight. There may also be other problems associated with eating disorders, such as depression, repeated worries, or trying to be perfect. Full recovery may take three to five years. Early recognition, action and family support of treatment make a better outcome more likely.

What can we do when our children need help and we don't have the answers?

- Call the Transcultural Mental Health Centre for advice in your language
- Call the Kids Help Line for advice and information
- Talk to the children's school counsellor
- Call the local community health centre
- Talk to a general practitioner for advice about local professionals such as child psychologists or pediatricians.

Transcultural Mental Health Centre

Tel: (02) 9912 3850 (during business hours)

Freecall for rural and remote areas of NSW: 1800 64 8911

Kids Help Line

Tel: 24hr 1800 55 1800