



Eating Disorders

What you need to know about Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa.

What are the main features of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa?

Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa are eating disorders where the person affected has an excessive desire to remain thin and to control body shape and weight. Both disorders are much more common in women than in men.

People with Anorexia Nervosa usually deny they have any problem. They will often disguise an emaciated appearance by wearing bulky, loose-fitting clothes. Frequently it is other family members who are more concerned than the person who is affected.

On the other hand those with Bulimia Nervosa often realize they have a problem with eating, but unlike Anorexia Nervosa, which is a very visible condition to others, Bulimia Nervosa is often disguised and kept secret for a long time.

Individuals can have some of the of both disorders.

What is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia Nervosa is a disorder characterized by deliberate attempts to lose weight, usually by voluntary starvation, but also by inducing vomiting, abusing laxatives and exercising excessively. There is an intense fear of becoming fat and an excessive and overwhelming desire for thinness.

Whom does Anorexia Nervosa affect?

It usually occurs in adolescent girls, often around the age of 16 or 17 years and in young women, but it may also affect older women, adolescent boys, young men and children nearing puberty. It is uncommon in women after the age of 30 years. In a wider sense Anorexia Nervosa also affects the whole family and friends because, as

the person becomes more and more concerned with weight and diet, other aspects of daily living take second place.

How common is Anorexia Nervosa?

Surveys have suggested that it affects one to two percent (1-2%) of adolescent girls and young women. It is much more common in female, affecting approximately 9 females to every 1 male.

What is the cause of Anorexia Nervosa?

This is still uncertain. It appears to result from the interaction of a number of factors including social, cultural, biological, psychological and personality factors.

What are the symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa?

Symptoms include:

- Weight loss, often severe. The strategies used to lose weight include:
 1. Avoidance of foods considered "fattening".
 2. Self-induced vomiting.
 3. Abuse of laxatives.
 4. Abuse of diuretics (water tablets).
 5. Abuse of appetite suppressants (slimming pills).
 6. Excessive exercise.

- An intense fear of becoming fat or gaining weight even though then person may be underweight and thin.
- A preoccupation with food, calories and weight.
- A distorted image of one's own body and appearance e.g. claiming to look or feel fat, even when very thin.
- Loss of sexual interest, loss of menstrual periods in women and loss of potency in men.
- If the onset of Anorexia Nervosa is before puberty in either girls or boys, then puberty will be delayed.

What are the physical consequences of having Anorexia Nervosa?

These are really the symptoms of starvation such as:

- Intolerance to cold.
- Low blood pressure.
- Slowed heart rate.
- Lowered temperature.
- Constipation.

- Poor circulation.
- Abdominal pain.
- Susceptibility to infection.
- Growth of downy hair on body.
- Serious complications affecting the heart, kidneys, brain, etc., which can be fatal.
- Osteoporosis (Brittle Bones).

What is the treatment for Anorexia Nervosa?

- This will depend to some extent on the severity of the weight loss and the presence of physical symptoms and complications. The person concerned may need hospitalization particularly if there has been significant weight loss, if there are serious complications, if the individual is also depressed or if out-patient treatment has failed.
- The aim of treatment is to restore and maintain an adequate weight and to establish a regular eating habit.
- Medication is not used very often.
- Education about the nature of Anorexia Nervosa and about healthy eating habits is a very important part of treatment.
- Psychological Intervention such as Individual Psychotherapy (“talking therapy”) and family therapy are the main forms of treatment. In Individual Psychotherapy the person with Anorexia Nervosa is encouraged to talk about personal difficulties and any other issues that may have a role in causing or maintaining the Eating Disorder.
- Support from family and friends is very important in helping the individual to make progress.

What is Bulimia Nervosa?

Bulimia Nervosa is a disorder in which there are repeated episodes of overeating (binges) and an excessive preoccupation with control of body weight. Binges are usually followed by self-induced vomiting in order to avoid weight gain include starvation, taking laxatives and diuretics.

However weight is usually within the normal range in Bulimia Nervosa.

Whom does Bulimia Nervosa affect?

It is much more common in women, especially young women, and it usually occurs at a slightly later age than Anorexia Nervosa. The ratio of female to male is same as in Anorexia Nervosa i.e. 9:1.

How common is Bulimia Nervosa?

Surveys have suggested that it affects between 5-10% of young women. However Bulimia Nervosa is a disorder that it is often kept secret so it difficult to give an accurate figure.

What are the symptoms of Bulimia Nervosa?

Symptoms include:

- Persistent preoccupation with eating.
- Irresistible craving for food.
- Binge eating of large amounts of food in a short period of time.
- During the binge there is a feeling of loss of control over eating.
- Feelings of guilt after the binge episode followed by self-induced vomiting.
- Laxative abuse.
- Alternating periods of binge eating and starvation.
- Using appetite suppressants (slimming pills) and diuretics.
- Fear of fatness
- Over-concern with body shape and weight, though body weight is more often normal in Bulimia Nervosa than in Anorexia Nervosa.
- Menstrual periods are often normal but may be irregular or absent.

What are the physical consequences of Bulimia Nervosa?

- Repeated vomiting leads to several complications: loss of potassium which can cause weakness, abnormalities of heart rhythm (which can be fatal), kidney damage, erosion of the teeth and swelling of the Salivary Gland.
- Many of the symptoms that occur in Anorexia Nervosa can also occur in Bulimia Nervosa

What is the treatment for Bulimia Nervosa?

The aim of treatment is to help the individual gain control over eating such that there is a return to eating regular meals without engaging in vomiting or bingeing. A particular type of psychological intervention known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is often used in order to help the individual change his/her faulty way of thinking.

Medication has been shown to be of value.

Further Help

Whether you are concerned about yourself or someone else it is best to seek advice from your family doctor. Your doctor may decide that

specialist help is necessary and you be referred to a psychiatrist or a psychologist.

BODYWHYS provides help, support and understanding for Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa sufferers. Helpline 01 283 5126.

You may also like to join a self help group in your area. Your local library or bookshop will likely have several books on Eating Disorders.

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