What are the warning signs of anorexia? Warning signs include
• Losing a lot of weight
• Refusing to eat
• Undergoing a change in eating habits and/or being obsessed with food and counting calories
• Exercising a lot or purging to lose weight
• Being depressed or irritable
• Feeling isolated from one’s family and/or friends

What are the symptoms of anorexia? Common physical symptoms include
• Being tired, weak, and dizzy
• Feeling cold all the time
• Being constipated, bloated, or unable to eat a full meal
Someone with anorexia may lose hair, have dry skin, and develop very fine body hair.
WHAT HEALTH PROBLEMS CAN ANOREXIA CAUSE?

Serious health problems that occur with anorexia include
• Heart problems, such as abnormal heart rhythms or heart failure
• Dehydration and malnutrition, which can lead to fainting, seizures, or pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas)
• Anemia
• Tooth decay and/or gum infections

Serious health problems also can occur if a person who has been starving starts taking in too many calories too quickly (called refeeding syndrome). These problems can include heart failure, serious breathing problems, seizures, and even sudden death.

Some people can also have mental health problems, such as thinking about or attempting suicide.

HOW DOES ANOREXIA AFFECT HORMONE HEALTH?

Anorexia can lead to low bone density, meaning weak bones. When growing teenagers have weak bones, they may end up with weak bones for life, even if they recover from anorexia. Their risk for fractures (broken bones) may increase.

Other hormone problems include
• Delayed puberty and/or growth failure in preteens and teens
• Amenorrhea (lack of menstrual periods)
• Too little estrogen in women, causing vaginal dryness and reduced fertility

WHERE CAN I GET HELP FOR MY LOVED ONE OR MYSELF?

You can get help from a primary care doctor, a dietitian, a doctor who specializes in adolescent health, or a mental health professional with experience treating eating disorders. If you suspect a loved one has anorexia, get help for them as soon as possible.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR ANOREXIA?

A team of medical providers is best for treatment. The person is treated as an outpatient, or sometimes if the weight loss is severe and has caused health problems, in residential programs or the hospital. The team should include a doctor to handle medical problems, a mental health professional for individual and/or family therapy, and a dietitian to manage nutritional issues.

The goals of treatment are to get the person back to a healthy weight and a healthy mental status. Sometimes a person also needs to take medicines, such as anti-depressants, or hormones, such as estrogen.

Treatment can help you or your loved one overcome anorexia and the problems that come with it. But some people find they need ongoing therapy to fight the urge to become anorexic later in life.

Questions to ask your doctor
• Does my loved one have anorexia (or do I)?
• What are the options for treatment?
• What are the risks and benefits of each treatment option?
• How long will my loved one (or I) need treatment?
• How can I support my loved one during treatment?

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

• Maudsley Parents, a site for parents of children with eating disorders: www.maudsleyparents.org
• Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders: www.FEAST-ED.org
• Books:
  — Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder by James Lock and Daniel Le Grange; Guilford Publishers, 2005
  — Skills-Based Learning for Caring for a Loved One with an Eating Disorder: The New Maudsley Method by Janet Treasure, Gráinne Smith, and Anna Crane; Routledge, 2007

GENERAL RESOURCES

• Hormone Health Network information about:
  — Osteoporosis: www.hormone.org/Osteoporosis/overview.cfm
• MedlinePlus (National Institutes of Health) information about anorexia: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000362.htm
• Mayo Clinic information about anorexia: www.mayoclinic.com/health/anorexia/DS00606

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