WHAT IS ANOREXIA NERVOSA?

- Anorexia nervosa is a chronic and often life-threatening eating disorder where the individual develops an obsession with losing weight.
- It is characterised by an intense fear of gaining weight. This is due to a distorted body image, which leads people to think they are fat even when they are thin.
- The obsession with food, dieting, and weight usually masks underlying emotional problems.

CAUSES

- Studies on the causes of the condition are inconclusive but there is a consensus that the obsession with food is a way of gaining control over emotional problems.
- The promotion of an ‘ideal’ body shape in the media means weight loss can be seen as a success, masking deep problems with self-esteem.
- Although no specific genetic cause has been identified, studies have found the chances of developing anorexia nervosa are increased if it has been previously identified in a family member (Strober, 2000).
- Behavioural and environmental influences may also play a role.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

- Low self-esteem and a tremendous need to control their surroundings and emotions.
- Low mood.
- Poor concentration.
- Denial of hunger.
- Fear of gaining weight.
- People with anorexia nervosa often believe they look overweight even when they are thin.
- Preoccupation with amounts and types of food, for example becoming obsessed with counting calories.
- People with anorexia nervosa often feel they do not deserve pleasure.

PHYSICAL PROBLEMS

- Weight loss.
- Self-induced vomiting.
- The use of excessive amounts of laxatives, diuretics or diet pills.
- Lack of menstruation.
- Obsessive exercise.
- A drop in body temperature.
- A covering of fine hair (lanugo) to insulate the body.
- Loss of hair on the scalp.
- Starvation can result in damage to major organs.
- Bones can become brittle due to loss of calcium.
- Studies show that anorexia is associated with a substantial risk of death and suicide (Herzog et al, 2000).

TREATMENT

- If the weight loss has not reached dangerous levels hospitalisation is not necessary.
- Treatment should focus on resolving the underlying psychological issues using a therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy. This should focus on changing people’s perceptions about themselves and improving self-esteem and negative body image.
- Family therapy can also be useful in challenging the interpersonal relationships that may have led someone to develop negative feelings about her or himself.
- If the person is in danger of starving then hospitalisation becomes appropriate.
- Commonly a target weight will be set and hospitals will use a behaviourally targeted regime to achieve this, with close monitoring of fluid intake and weight gain.
- Weight loss is only a symptom of anorexia nervosa, however, and the focus must remain on repairing the individual’s self-esteem.
- Antidepressants may speed up the recovery process.
- Chlorpromazine may be beneficial for those experiencing severe obsessions and increased anxiety.

WHO DOES IT AFFECT?
The condition is most prevalent in teenage girls and young adult women, although it can manifest itself in young men and older women.

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING