

Knowledge of effects of severe anorexia can inspire patients to seek assistance

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Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder characterised by an abnormal relationship with food. People with the condition fear the possibility of gaining weight and take measures to avoid this, such as engaging in caloric restriction, excessively exercising, abusing laxatives and inducing emesis. Most people with anorexia develop the condition between the ages of 14 and 18 years, and women make up the overwhelming majority of patients who receive a diagnosis of this common and well-known eating disorder.

People with anorexia often suffer from depression, anxiety and other psychiatric disorders, which can lead to suicidal behaviours and low self-esteem. The condition is not only deadly because of its links to poor mental health, but also because it can lead to a wide range of negative effects on multiple organ systems.

Some of the complications of anorexia, such as hair loss, dehydration and xerosis (dry skin), may appear to be caused by other stimuli and may be superficially resolved through procedures such as hair transplantation, behavioural changes such as drinking beverages, or the frequent use of moisturising creams. The chronic malnutrition that affects most patients with untreated anorexia can, however, lead to hormone imbalances, osteoporosis, hypotension, gastric reflux, nutritional deficiencies and bradycardia.

In order to avoid the potentially life-threatening consequences of insufficiently managed anorexia, it is important that patients access treatment at the earliest opportunity. Pharmacotherapy for comorbid mental disorders such as depression or anxiety has generated mixed results for people with anorexia, but psychotherapeutic interventions have allowed patients to reframe their perception of food and their body.

Sociocultural influences have been known to encourage pathological thinking patterns and promote disordered eating and caloric restriction. Since a considerable percentage of patients who develop anorexia exhibit symptoms before adulthood, it is of paramount importance that vulnerable individuals cultivate healthy relationships with food at an early age. This may be achieved through educational programmes at academic establishments or mindfully vetting people who attempt to purchase laxatives from pharmacies.

While these measures could help safeguard vulnerable individuals from harmful relationships with food and exercise, it is increasingly important to also accurately diagnose and treat anorexia in males, who are less likely to seek assistance for psychiatric disorders in general.