FREE GUIDE · FOR PARENTS

Anorexia in children and teenagers: a guide for parents

What anorexia is, why it is so hard to argue with, what NHS treatment usually involves, and how to support your child while looking after yourself.

Worried about your child's physical health right now? Contact your GP urgently or call NHS 111. In an emergency, call 999. Beat, the UK eating disorder charity, has helplines for parents and carers.

When your child is referred to an NHS eating disorder service, it can feel as if the ground has gone from under you. You may be frightened, confused, and wondering how you didn't see it sooner. This guide is for parents whose child has anorexia nervosa. It explains what is going on, what treatment usually looks like, and how you can help, including how to look after yourself.

What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia is a serious mental health condition. It isn't a choice, a phase or a diet that went too far. Its main features are:

- **An intense fear of gaining weight,** even when underweight.
- **A distorted body image:** seeing themselves as larger than they are.
- **Restricted eating,** sometimes with excessive exercise or purging.

It can have serious physical effects, including weak muscles and bones, strain on the heart, kidneys and other organs, and hormonal changes such as periods stopping. It also affects mood and thinking, often bringing low mood, anxiety and irritability.

Why it is so hard to argue with

Brains learn by trial and error, and they hold on to anything that seems to work. For some young people, restricting food starts to feel like a solution: a way to feel calmer, more in control, or good enough. The brain learns it, and the pattern quickly becomes automatic.

Which is why, very often, it isn't really about the food. It's about the underlying process: control, calm, feeling good enough. Food is just where the brain found a lever to pull.

Then malnourishment makes things harder. A starved brain has fewer resources, and it tends to think more rigidly and anxiously. So the illness ends up defending itself. Your child's brain can be very convincing, to them and sometimes to you.

It can help to separate your child from the illness. When they shout, bargain or hide food, that is usually the

anorexia talking, not your child being difficult. You are on your child's side, against the illness.

How NHS treatment usually works

NHS eating disorder services usually offer a team approach, combining medical, psychological and nutritional support. Getting help early really does make a difference.

1. Assessment

- **Referral:** this often comes from your GP, a school nurse or another professional.
- **Medical checks:** blood tests, heart monitoring (ECG) and weight checks help the team understand the physical risks.
- **Mental health assessment:** a psychologist or psychiatrist will ask about eating, mood and family life.

2. Treatment

- **Family-based treatment:** for children and teenagers this is often the first treatment offered. Parents take an active role in preparing and supervising meals, to help restore weight and regular eating.
- **Psychological therapy:** once your child is physically more stable, individual therapy can work on what sits underneath, such as perfectionism, self-esteem or difficult experiences.
- **Dietitian support:** help to plan balanced, structured meals as a family.
- **Medical monitoring:** regular check-ups to keep an eye on physical health.

3. Day-patient or inpatient care

If your child's physical health becomes a serious concern, the team may recommend a specialist day or inpatient unit, where they can get more intensive care and support.

What to expect as a parent

- **Resistance.** Many young people with anorexia can't see how unwell they are, and fight treatment. That is the illness's thinking, not your child trying to be difficult.
- **Big emotions.** Expect arguments, tears and distress, from them and probably from you. Patience and compassion matter, and so do breaks.
- **Guilt.** Most parents blame themselves. Anorexia has many contributing factors. You didn't cause it, and you are a big part of the solution.
- **Your role.** Especially in family-based treatment, you'll be involved in meals, monitoring, and boundaries around exercise and other behaviours. You'll also learn new ways of talking that avoid feeding the illness without meaning to.
- **Ups and downs.** Recovery isn't a straight line, and setbacks are common. Notice the small wins: weight stabilising, a new food tried, a calmer meal, a better mood.

Helping at home

- **Keep meals regular and predictable.** Structure takes some of the decisions, and some of the fight, out of eating.
- **Don't debate the illness.** You won't win an argument with anorexia. Stay calm, firm and kind, and repeat yourself as often as you need to.
- **Watch the language.** Avoid comments about weight, shape or appearance, even positive ones. Talk about health, strength and energy instead.
- **Make space to talk** about feelings, away from mealtimes, without judgement.
- **Agree clear rules about exercise** with the treatment team until your child's health has improved.

Look after your own tokens

Supporting a child with anorexia is draining, and you can't do it on empty. Share the load with your partner, family or trusted friends. Find support for yourself, whether that is a parent group, Beat's helplines or your own therapy. Be kind to yourself about what you can and can't do. Looking after yourself isn't selfish; it is how you keep going.

Key takeaways

1. **Anorexia is treatable,** and families and professionals working together make the biggest difference.
2. **Separate your child from the illness.** You're on the same side.
3. **You didn't cause it,** and you are an important part of recovery.
4. **Calm, firm, kind and consistent** beats winning arguments.
5. **Recovery takes time.** Look after yourself along the way.

If you're ever worried about your child's health, don't wait for the next appointment. Contact your GP, the eating disorder service or NHS 111.

Further help

- Beat: the UK eating disorder charity, with advice, helplines and peer support for parents and carers.
- NHS: anorexia nervosa: symptoms, treatment and where to get help.
- Your local NHS eating disorder service may run parent workshops or have information packs. Ask your team.

Book: *Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder* by James Lock and Daniel Le Grange.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I'll suggest the best next step.

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