**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ANOREXIA**

**A Guide for Sisters and Brothers (ages 8-13) of Patients with Anorexia**

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Q: What is anorexia?

A: Anorexia is a brain disease which affects a person’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about food and weight. People with anorexia are very afraid of eating and gaining weight, so they don’t eat enough food to keep their body healthy. Kids with anorexia may lose weight or they may not gain the weight they need in order to grow.

Q: What causes anorexia?

A: No one knows for sure. However, scientists have discovered that the brains of people with anorexia are different from the brains of healthy people. The chemicals in an anorexic’s brain don’t work properly, which is why anorexics feel sad and nervous and react to food differently than healthy people. Scientists have also discovered that anorexia tends to run in families. Your sister may have been born with a certain type of brain which made her more likely to develop anorexia.

Q: Will I get anorexia too?

A: It is possible. Anorexia, like many diseases, tends to run in families. Scientists have found that if you have a family member with anorexia, you are much more likely to get anorexia yourself. However, there are many things you can do to prevent yourself from getting anorexia in the future. First, you can make sure that you eat plenty of nutritious food and stay at a healthy weight so that your body and brain continue to grow and develop properly. Second, make sure you never go on a diet. It is not good for kids or teenagers to lose weight, because losing weight can be the start of anorexia for people who have this family history. Third, do your best to love your body and take good care of it. Fourth, if you start feeling depressed or anxious or you are struggling with other problems, ask your parents to take you to a therapist so that you can get help. Finally, if you ever feel as though you are having symptoms of anorexia (feeling nervous around food, wanting to lose weight, disliking your body, not eating enough, worrying about getting fat), tell your parents right away so that they can get you the help you need.

Q: How does anorexia start?

A: Anorexia usually starts when a person isn’t eating enough food to keep up with her body’s needs. For some kids, anorexia begins when they start eating “healthy” by cutting out certain foods they used to enjoy. Some kids start eating less or exercising more because they want to get thinner or they want to avoid gaining weight. Some kids go on a diet because they don’t like the way their body looks. Once they start dieting, they can’t stop even if they want to. Other kids may first lose weight by accident because they are sick or injured, they grow quickly, or they don’t eat enough to give them the energy they need for sports or dance.

Q: Why did my sister get anorexia?

A: No one knows for sure. However, we do know that anorexia is an illness, just like cancer. It is not your sister’s fault; it is not your fault or your family’s fault. Right now, it is not important to figure out why she has anorexia. Instead, your whole family needs to focus on helping her get better. In the future, when your sister is healthy and eating normally, it may be helpful for your sister and your whole family to talk with a psychologist about issues related to her anorexia.

Q: How does anorexia affect the body?

A: Kids with anorexia may lose weight or they may not gain the weight their bodies need to grow and develop. Anorexia affects all parts of the body, including the heart, brain, kidneys, liver, stomach, and bones. People with anorexia often feel cold and tired. Their heart slows down, their bones break easily, their skin becomes dry, and they may have trouble sleeping.

Q: How does anorexia affect thoughts and feelings?

A: Anorexia is a disease of the brain. Since thoughts and feelings come from the brain, anorexia causes many changes in thoughts and feelings. People with anorexia think about food and weight a lot. They are afraid to eat even when they are hungry. They feel sad, worried, nervous, or angry. They may stop spending time with their friends. Sometimes people with anorexia feel fat even when they are very thin. They may want to change their bodies and lose weight even when they don’t need to. People with anorexia often have poor self-esteem, which means that they don’t like themselves and they criticize themselves too much.

Q: Why is my sister acting weird?

A: Our brains need plenty of food in order to function properly. About 20% of the food we eat is used by our brains. Since your sister did not eat enough food for many weeks or months, her brain has been damaged. Therefore, her behaviors (which come from the brain) have been damaged as well. Your sister has a very hard time controlling her behavior right now because of this brain damage. Your sister may feel very sad and cry all the time. She might act very mean and start fights with people for no reason. She may scream, throw food, break things, hit or kick people, or try to hurt herself. It is important to remember that your sister is not doing these things on purpose. She is not a bad person, she just has a very bad disease that makes her act differently.

Q: Will my sister’s brain always be damaged? Will she ever be normal again?

A: Your sister’s brain can heal, and her behavior can return to normal, but it will take lots of time and hard work in order for this to happen. If your sister eats plenty of food, returns to a healthy weight, and talks with a psychologist about her thoughts and feelings, her brain will become healthy again and her behavior will return to normal. It will take many months for this healing to occur.

Q: Why does my sister always say she is fat, even though she looks so thin?

A: Your sister cannot see things the way healthy people do because the brain controls what we see, and her brain is very sick. A part of the brain called the insular cortex affects our feelings and how we see ourselves. Scientists believe that the insular cortex does not work properly in people with anorexia, so that they see themselves as fat even when they are skinny. Anorexia also causes people to become very afraid of getting fat, so your sister will feel scared, angry, and sad when she talks about getting fat or being fat.

Q: How common is anorexia?

A: About one in every 100 teenage girls has anorexia. So, if there are 200 girls in a middle school, two of them probably have anorexia. While anorexia is more common in girls, boys can get anorexia too, and the disease is just as serious in boys as it is in girls. Anorexia usually begins when a person is a pre-teen or teenager.

Q: How serious is anorexia?

A: Anorexia is a very serious disease. Some people with anorexia get so sick that they need to go to the hospital. Some people die from anorexia. The good news is that anorexia can be successfully treated. People who get treatment while they are young, soon after the anorexia starts, are less likely to die from it. People who have had anorexia for many years are much more likely to die from this disease.

Q: How is anorexia treated?

A: There are many ways to treat anorexia. Scientists have studied different types of anorexia treatments. They found that a type of treatment called the Maudsley Method works best for children and teenagers with anorexia. This treatment is called the Maudsley Method because it was started by psychologists and doctors at the Maudsley Hospital in London, England. In the Maudsey Method, the patient’s family works with a psychologist and a doctor to help the patient get better.

The Maudsley Method involves three parts. In the first part, your parents will prepare all of the food for your sister and sit with her until she has eaten her entire meal. Your sister’s anorexia makes it almost impossible for her to make healthy choices about what and how much she should eat. Therefore, your parents will decide when, what, and how much your sister will eat. The goal of the first part of treatment is to help your sister gain the weight her body needs in order to be healthy.

Once your sister is at a healthy body weight and all of the systems in her body are working properly, the second part of treatment begins. In the second part of treatment, your parents will work together with the psychologist to help your sister learn to choose the type and amount of food she eats. The goal of the second part of treatment is to make sure that your sister can eat enough on her own without losing any weight.

In the third part of treatment, the psychologist and your parents will help your sister work on getting back to a normal, healthy life. The third part of treatment focuses on your sister’s thoughts, feelings, and relationships with other people. The psychologist will help your sister learn to manage difficult feelings like sadness, anxiety, and anger in healthy ways.

Q: Will I be part of my sister’s treatment?

Yes. Sisters and brothers of patients with anorexia are very important in Maudsley treatment. You will attend appointments with the psychologist along with your family. During these appointments, you can share your thoughts, feelings, and opinions about your sister’s illness. The psychologist will help you learn to manage your own feelings so that you can support your sister as she gets better.

Your parents will be in charge of preparing and serving meals and snacks, but you can do many things to help your sister get better. Your sister may be very sad, angry, or nervous during treatment because the anorexia wants her to eat less and your parents will be making her eat more. You can help your sister through this difficult time by talking with her, listening to her, telling her jokes, making her laugh, playing games or watching movies together, or enjoying other activities together. If you provide lots of love and support to your sister, treatment will be less difficult for her.

Q: What if I have my own problems during my sister’s treatment?

A: Anorexia is very hard on the whole family. It is common for brothers and sisters of patients with anorexia to have their own emotional problems, and the stress of anorexia just makes these problems worse. Your sister may be the one with anorexia, but the entire family is suffering along with her. If you are really struggling, ask your parents if you can see a therapist yourself to work on your own problems. Getting therapy for yourself is a very brave and smart thing to do. Once you feel better, you will be better able to support your sister in her recovery. Also, getting help for your own issues sets a good example for your sister. Once your sister is able to eat properly on her own and has reached a good weight, the psychologist working with your family will help everyone get back to a normal life.

Q: Why can’t my sister choose her own food?

A: At the beginning of treatment, your sister cannot choose her own food because anorexia makes it very difficult for her to choose the types and amounts of food she needs in order to recover. Scientists who study anorexia have found that kids who choose their own foods early in treatment tend to be sick for a very long time. Scientists have also found that kids whose parents choose their foods for them and help them eat tend to recover from anorexia much faster. Once your sister’s body and brain are healthier, she will be allowed to make some of her own food choices. By the end of treatment, your sister will be able to choose what and how much to eat, just like she used to before she got anorexia.

Q: How long does treatment last?

A: Treatment lasts until your sister is completely recovered from anorexia. She must go through all three parts of the Maudsley Method before she is all better. Once her body and brain are healthy, she is eating normally without fear, she feels good about herself, and she is happy with her life, treatment will end. For most kids with anorexia who are treated with the Maudsley Method, treatment lasts about one year. The length of your sister’s treatment may be shorter or longer based on how well she is doing.

Q: Will my sister have anorexia forever?

A: No! If she goes through treatment for anorexia, she can recover completely and return to the normal, happy life she used to have. Scientists have found that most kids who are treated with the Maudsley Method recover within one year, and stay healthy after that. In treatment, your sister will learn how to take care of her body and her brain so that the anorexia does not come back. In addition, your whole family will learn how to support your sister and keep her healthy so that she does not have problems with anorexia in the future. Finally, your family will come up with a plan for how to help your sister right away if the anorexia returns so that she can get better as soon as possible.

Q: Why can’t my sister just get better on her own?

A: Anorexia is a serious disease, and people cannot recover from serious diseases on their own. People with other diseases, such as cancer or diabetes or heart disease, need medicine and help from doctors in order to get better. Kids with anorexia need the help of their doctor, their psychologist, and their family in order to get better.

Q: Isn’t my sister just doing this for attention?

A: No. It is common for family members to feel as though the patient is behaving this way in order to get attention, but this is not the truth. Your sister did not choose to have anorexia. No one would ever choose to suffer from this terrible illness. Your sister has gotten a lot of attention since she’s been sick, and she will continue to get a lot of attention during treatment. This is because she needs lots and lots of help in order get better. Parents must always give lots of attention to a child with any illness. Your parents still love you just as much as they always have, and they still care very much about your feelings and your happiness. However, it is very hard for parents to spend enough time with all of their children when one child is very sick. Your parents are trying their best.

If you feel as though you are not getting enough attention, tell your parents how you feel. It may also be helpful for you to talk about this during family therapy sessions with the psychologist. The psychologist and your parents can work together to find ways for you get the love and care that you need while your sister is in treatment.

Q: Why does my sister have to eat so much food?

A: Food is the best medicine for anorexia! In order to recover from anorexia, your sister must eat a large amount of food and a wide variety of foods. Our bodies and brains require good nutrition in order to stay healthy and work properly. Since she has had anorexia, her brain and body have been damaged because they have not gotten enough nutrition. The only way for her to get healthy is to eat a lot of food. The vitamins and nutrients from food will repair the damage that the anorexia has caused to her body and brain. When her brain has gotten plenty of nutrients from food, she will start to think more normally and will feel happier and calmer (remember, our thoughts and feelings come from our brains). While your sister is in treatment, she will need to eat more food than other people her age because her body and brain need extra nutrients to repair anorexia’s damage.

Q: Why does my sister have to gain so much weight?

A: People with anorexia have to gain weight in order to get better. If your sister’s body is too thin, she will not grow properly or develop into an adult, and her brain will stay sick. Being too thin causes many health problems. Scientists have found that people with anorexia who do not gain enough weight are more likely to be very sad, worried, and afraid to eat for a long time. Scientists have also found that people with anorexia who gain plenty of weight and continue to grow are more likely to be happy and healthy and live normal lives. Your sister cannot decide how much she should weigh because the anorexia makes it very hard for her to think normally about weight. The anorexia makes your sister want to be very thin, even though it is unhealthy for her. Each person’s healthy weight range is different, based on their height, their age, their gender, and their body build. You can’t always tell whether someone is below their healthy weight just by looking at them. An anorexic person’s brain will remain very sick if she is even a few pounds below her healthy weight. The doctor and psychologist will work together to decide what your sister’s healthy weight should be. The doctor, psychologist, and your parents will help your sister to make sure that she gains the right amount of weight – not too much or too little. The process of gaining weight will be very difficult for your sister. She will hate gaining weight because the anorexia makes her feel scared, sad, and angry every time she gains a pound.

Q: Why isn’t my sister allowed to exercise?

Exercise is very good for healthy people. However, exercise can be dangerous for people with anorexia because their bodies are weak and sick. People with anorexia who exercise can have heart attacks, break their bones, faint, or even die. Anorexia makes people want to exercise way too much, even though exercise is not healthy for them. Your sister will need to gain a lot of weight at the beginning of treatment, and exercise makes it harder for her to gain the weight she needs to get healthy. It is very difficult for someone with anorexia to stop exercising. The anorexia will make her feel horrible, and she may cry or scream or try to exercise secretly. You can help your sister during this time by doing things with her to make her feel better, like playing games or watching movies or talking about other things.

At the beginning of treatment, it is very important that your sister stays away from exercise and gets plenty of rest so that her body can repair itself. Early in treatment, while her body is healing, she will need to stop going to gym class, dance class, sports practice, riding her bike, and any other physical activity. Once her body is stronger and she has reached a healthy weight, she will be able to exercise again. By the end of treatment, she will be able to do whatever sports or activities she enjoyed before anorexia.

Q: My sister worries that treatment will make her fat. Is this true?

A: No, treatment will not make her fat. By the end of treatment, her body will be healthy and strong. Having a healthy body means being at the right weight for her. She will be at a healthy body weight when she feels good and her body and brain are working properly. Many kids with anorexia worry that they are fat or that they will become fat. This worry feels very real and very scary, and can cause kids with anorexia to do whatever they can to avoid eating. However, the fear of getting fat is the result of the anorexia. It is not the truth.

Q: Should I tell people about my sister’s anorexia?

A: It is up to you to decide whether you want to talk to your friends about your sister’s anorexia. There is no reason to be embarrassed about having a sister with anorexia. However, anorexia is a personal, private problem, and some kids prefer not to talk about it with their friends. Other kids find that talking to friends about their sister’s anorexia helps them feel better because friends who know what’s going on may be better able to provide support. Ask your sister how she feels about you telling your friends. Your sister may want to protect her privacy, or she may not mind if you tell your friends. Either way, it is best to share this information only with your best friends out of respect for your sister’s privacy.

Q: Should I read more about anorexia on the internet?

A: A lot of the online information about anorexia is not true, so reading about anorexia on the internet might make you more confused and give you false ideas about this disease. If you have questions about anorexia or about your sister’s treatment, it is best to ask your psychologist, your doctor, or your parents.

If you would like to read about anorexia online, the best website for family members of patients with anorexia is from a group called FEAST: Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment for Eating Disorders. Their web address is [www.feast-ed.org](http://www.feast-ed.org).