

Anorexia Nervosa

What is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia Nervosa is a serious and potentially life threatening mental illness. A person with Anorexia Nervosa has not made a 'lifestyle choice', they are actually very unwell and need help.

The reasons behind the development of Anorexia Nervosa will differ from person to person; known causes include genetic predisposition and a combination of environmental, social and cultural factors.

For some people, restricting their food and weight can be a way of controlling areas of life that feel out of their control and their body image can come to define their entire sense of self worth. It can also be a way of expressing emotions that may feel too complex or frightening such as pain, stress or anxiety.

Restrictive dieting and excessive exercise can be contributing factors to the onset of Anorexia Nervosa. Women and girls with Anorexia Nervosa may use dieting behaviour in a bid to achieve a culturally constructed thin ideal whereas men may over exercise and control what they eat to achieve a muscular body.

While it is generally accepted that Anorexia Nervosa is more common in females across the ages (only 10% of sufferers are males), recent research suggests that amongst teenagers, the number of males with Anorexia Nervosa is rising, and in this age group, an equal number of males and females have been shown to meet full criteria for diagnosis of Anorexia Nervosa.

Defining Anorexia Nervosa:

Weight loss

A person with Anorexia Nervosa will weigh less than 85% of what is expected for his/her age and height and may look emaciated. They could also have lost a considerable amount of weight in a short period of time. The person will be unable to maintain what is considered to be a normal and healthy weight.

A fear of gaining weight

Even when people with Anorexia Nervosa are underweight, starved or malnourished they will still possess an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming 'fat'.

Disturbed body image

When someone has Anorexia Nervosa the amount of attention they place on their body image can be enormous. The person's self worth can become entirely defined



by the way they think they look. A person with Anorexia Nervosa can also develop a distorted view of their body, they may see themselves as fat when in reality they are dangerously underweight.

Sub-Types of Anorexia Nervosa

There are two types of Anorexia Nervosa, Restricting Subtype and Binge Eating/Purging Subtype. Both are very serious mental illnesses that require treatment.

Restricting Subtype

People with Anorexia Nervosa Restricting Subtype place severe restriction on the amount and type of food they consume. This can manifest in different ways including some or all of the following:

- Restricting certain types of foods (e.g. carbohydrates, 'fatty' foods)
- Counting calories
- Skipping meals
- Obsessive rules and rigid thinking (e.g. only eating food that is one colour)

These restrictive behaviours around food can be accompanied by excessive exercise.

Binge Eating/Purging Subtype

People with Anorexia Nervosa Binge Eating/Purging Subtype also place severe restriction on the amount and type of food they consume. In addition to this the person will also have binge eating/purging behaviour. These behaviours include:

- Binge eating – eating a large amount of food accompanied by a feeling of 'loss of control'
- Self induced vomiting, deliberately misusing laxatives, diuretics or enemas to compensate for eating food

What are the warning signs of Anorexia Nervosa?

Having awareness about Anorexia Nervosa and its signs and symptoms can make a huge difference to the duration and severity of the illness. Seeking help at the first warning sign is much more effective than waiting until the illness is in full swing. If you or someone you know is exhibiting some or a combination of these signs it is vital to seek help and support as soon as possible.

The warning signs of Anorexia Nervosa can be physical, psychological and behavioural. It is possible for someone with Anorexia Nervosa to display a combination of these symptoms.

Physical signs:

- Rapid weight loss or frequent changes in weight
- Loss or disturbance of menstrual periods in girls and women and decreased libido in men
- Fainting or dizziness
- Feeling cold most of the time, even in warm weather (caused by poor circulation)



- Feeling bloated, constipated, or the development of intolerances to food
- Feeling tired and not sleeping well
- Lethargy and low energy
- Facial changes (e.g. looking pale, sunken eyes)
- Fine hair appearing on face and body

Psychological Signs:

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and weight
- Feeling anxious and/or irritable around meal times
- An intense fear of gaining weight
- Refusal to maintain a normal body weight for the person's age and height
- Depression and anxiety
- Slowing of thinking and increased difficulty concentrating
- 'Black and white' thinking - rigid thoughts about food being 'good' or 'bad'
- Having a distorted body image (e.g. seeing themselves as fat when in reality they are underweight)
- Low self esteem and perfectionism
- Increased sensitivity to comments relating to food, weight, body shape, exercise
- Extreme body image dissatisfaction

Behavioural Signs:

- Dieting behaviour (e.g. fasting, counting calories/kilojoules, avoiding food groups such as fats and carbohydrates)
- Deliberate misuse of laxatives, appetite suppressants, enemas and diuretics
- Repetitive or obsessive behaviours relating to body shape and weight (e.g. weighing themselves repeatedly, looking in the mirror obsessively and pinching waist or wrists)
- Evidence of binge eating (e.g. disappearance or hoarding of food)
- Eating in private and avoiding meals with other people
- Anti-social behaviour, spending more and more time alone
- Secrecy around eating (e.g. saying they have eaten when they haven't, hiding uneaten food in their rooms)
- Compulsive or excessive exercising (e.g. exercising in bad weather, in spite of sickness, injury or social events and experiencing distress if exercise is not possible)
- Radical changes in food preferences (e.g. suddenly disliking food they have always enjoyed in the past, reporting of food allergies, food intolerances or becoming vegetarian)
- Obsessive rituals around food preparation and eating (e.g. eating very slowly, cutting food into very small pieces, insisting that meals are served at exactly the same time everyday)
- Preoccupation with preparing food for others, recipes and nutrition
- Self harm, substance abuse or suicide attempts



What are the risks associated with Anorexia Nervosa?

The risks associated with Anorexia Nervosa are severe and can be life threatening. People with Anorexia Nervosa may experience:

- Anaemia (iron deficiency)
- Reduced/compromised immune system function
- Intestinal problems (e.g. abdominal pain, constipation, diarrhoea)
- Loss of or disturbance of menstrual periods in girls and women
- Increased risk of infertility in men and women
- Kidney failure
- Osteoporosis– a condition that can lead to human bones becoming fragile and easy to fracture
- Heart problems (e.g. cardiac abnormalities, sudden cardiac arrest)
- Death

Is recovery from Anorexia Nervosa possible?

Yes. It is possible to recover from Anorexia Nervosa, even if you have been living with the illness for many years. The path to recovery can be long and challenging, however with the right team supporting you and a high level of commitment, recovery is an achievable goal. Treatment for anorexia is available, seek help from a professional with specialised knowledge in eating disorders.

Getting help

If you suspect that you or someone you know has Anorexia Nervosa, it is important to seek help immediately. The earlier you seek help the closer you are to recovery. While your GP may not be a specialist in eating disorders, they are a good 'first base.' A GP can provide a referral to a practitioner with specialised knowledge in health, nutrition and eating disorders.

To find help in your local area go to www.nedc.com.au/helplines

