

What is Anorexia Nervosa?



The Butterfly Foundation
Supporting Australians with Eating Disorders

OVERVIEW

Anorexia Nervosa is characterised by severe starvation and dramatic weight loss and can also sometimes involve purging behaviours. People with anorexia experience high body distortion and mistakenly believe and feel they are overweight, no matter how underweight they may actually be.

Anorexia is characterised by the following symptoms:

- Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height.
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming “fat,” even though underweight.
- Disturbance in the way in which body weight or shape is experienced including undue influence of body weight/ shape on self-evaluation and denial of the seriousness or even existence of low body weight.
- Absence of menstrual cycles in girls and women who had experienced this before anorexia.

There are two sub types of Anorexia Nervosa:

Restricting Type: Weight loss is accomplished primarily through dieting, fasting and excessive exercise. People experiencing this sub type do not regularly engage in binge eating or purging.

Binge Eating/Purging Type: Involves regularly engaging in binge eating and/or purging. Most people with anorexia nervosa who binge eat also purge through self-induced vomiting or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas. Some people do not binge eat, but do regularly purge after eating small amounts of food.

Many of the physical signs and complications of anorexia are attributed to starvation.

The following are some warning signs of anorexia nervosa that are important to look out for, particularly if they appear in clusters of symptoms.

Approximately one in 100 adolescent girls develop anorexia nervosa

PHYSICAL WARNING SIGNS OF ANOREXIA

- Noticeable thinness and continued loss of weight
- Obsessive exercise
- Loosing hair or thinning of hair
- Feeling cold when the temperature is normal
- Cessation of periods in post puberty girls and women
- Lethargy
- Insomnia

BEHAVIOURAL WARNING SIGNS OF ANOREXIA

- Intense fear of gaining weight or being “fat”
- Preoccupation with food, weight, calories and dieting
- Denial of hunger
- Making excuses to avoid meal times or social outings with family and friends

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- Obsessive measuring of body parts and persistently using a mirror to check for perceived areas of “fat”
- Rigid or fixated behaviour attached to food
- Wearing big or baggy clothes to hide weight loss

PSYCHOLOGICAL WARNING SIGNS OF ANOREXIA

- Low self esteem
- Obsessive thoughts about food and weight
- Weighing self frequently
- Perfectionism and self criticism
- Depression and/or anxiety
- Denial of the seriousness of the problem
- Strong need to control external environment
- Inflexible thinking

One in 10 young adults and approximately 24% of children diagnosed with anorexia nervosa are males.

COMPLICATIONS OF ANOREXIA NERVOSA

- Slow heart rate
- Low blood pressure
- Low blood sugar
- Reduction of bone density (osteoporosis)
- Muscle wasting
- Brittle, thin and fragile nails
- Loss of hair
- Fine hair appearing on face, trunk and limbs (lanugo)
- Tooth decay and gum disease
- Abdominal pain
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Nervous irritability
- Dry, rough and flaky skin
- Severe dehydration which can result in kidney failure
- Anemia

- Poor circulation - feeling cold on extremities
- Peripheral edema

If you believe you have anorexia you are not alone. Help & support is available

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

It is important that if you believe you or someone you know has an eating disorder to seek professional assistance immediately. It can be scary and frightening to make this first step, however the earlier help is sought, the quicker the road to recovery. If you require a referral to a general practitioner or other health practitioner practicing in the eating disorder field, please contact The Butterfly Foundation for a confidential referral

The Butterfly Foundation offers telephone and email support for those with eating disorders and their family and friends. This confidential and supportive counselling service is available on (02) 9412 4499 or at support@thebutterflyfoundation.org.au