

What is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia Nervosa is a serious, potentially life threatening mental illness.

bid to achieve a culturally constructed thin ideal whereas men may over exercise and control their diet to achieve a muscular body.

It is commonly accepted that Anorexia is more frequently diagnosed in females across the ages. However, a recent population study has suggested that in adolescents, there are an equal number of males and females suffering from this illness.

A person with Anorexia has not made a 'lifestyle choice', they are actually very unwell and need help.

The reasons behind the development of Anorexia 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. Women and girls with Anorexia may use dieting behaviour in a

Defining Anorexia:

Restricted energy intake

A person with Anorexia is unable to maintain what is considered to be a normal and healthy weight. They could also have lost a considerable amount of weight in a short period of time.

A fear of gaining weight

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

Disturbed body image

When someone has Anorexia 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 can also develop a distorted view of their body. They may see themselves as overweight when in reality they are dangerously underweight. Frequently there is a preoccupation with certain body parts, particularly the abdomen, buttocks and thighs.

Sub-Types of Anorexia

Restricting Subtype

People with this subtype place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they consume. This can manifest in different ways including some or all of the following:

- Restricting certain food groups
- Counting calories
- Skipping meals
- Obsessive rules and rigid thinking

Binge Eating/Purging Subtype

People with this subtype also place severe restriction on the amount and type of food they consume. In addition to this the person will display purging behaviour and may also engage in binge eating. Binge eating involves eating a large amount of food and feeling a 'loss of control'. Purging behaviour involves self induced vomiting, or deliberately misusing laxatives, diuretics or enemas to compensate for eating food.



What are the warning signs of Anorexia?

Having awareness about Anorexia 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.

Someone with Anorexia may display any combination of the following warning signs.

Physical signs:

- Rapid weight loss or frequent weight changes
- Loss or disturbance of menstruation in girls and women and decreased libido in men
- Fainting or dizziness
- Feeling cold most of the time, even in warm weather
- Feeling bloated, constipated, or the development of intolerances to food
- Feeling tired and not sleeping well
- Lethargy and low energy
- Facial changes
- 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
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- Unable to maintain a normal body weight for their age and height
- Depression and anxiety
- Reduced capacity for thinking and increased difficulty concentrating

- 'Black and white' thinking
- Having a distorted body image
- Low self esteem and perfectionism
- Increased sensitivity to comments relating to food, weight, body shape, exercise
- Extreme body image dissatisfaction

Behavioural signs:

- Dieting behaviour
- Deliberate misuse of laxatives, appetite suppressants, enemas and diuretics
- Repetitive or obsessive behaviours relating to body shape and weight
- Evidence of binge eating
- Eating in private and avoiding meals with other people
- Anti-social behaviour
- Secrecy around eating
- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Radical changes in food preferences
- Obsessive rituals around food preparation and eating
- Preoccupation with preparing food for others, recipes and nutrition
- Self harm, substance abuse or suicide attempts

What are the risks associated with Anorexia?

The risks associated with Anorexia are severe and can be life threatening. They include:

- Anaemia
- Compromised immune system
- Intestinal problems
- Loss or disturbance of menstruation in girls and women
- Increased risk of infertility in men and women
- Kidney failure
- Osteoporosis– a condition that leads to bones becoming fragile and easily fractured
- Heart problems
- Death

Is recovery from Anorexia possible?

Yes. It is possible to recover from Anorexia, 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 achievable. 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, 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' and can refer you 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

The National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC) is an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Health

This fact sheet is for general information only and should not be a substitute for medical or health advice. While every effort is made to ensure the information is accurate NEDC makes no warranties that the information is current, complete or suitable for any purpose.