

Introduction

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder. It causes people to obsess about their weight and the food they eat. People with anorexia may limit the food they eat, even though they may be too thin. Anorexia can be hard to overcome. It can lead to life threatening problems. But with treatment, you can return to healthier eating habits.

This reference summary explains anorexia nervosa. It covers symptoms and causes of the disorder, as well as treatment options.



Anorexia

Anorexia nervosa, or anorexia, is a type of eating disorder. Many people with anorexia try to keep a weight that is far below normal for their age and height. Anorexia is an unhealthy way to try to cope with emotional problems. When you have anorexia, you may base your self-worth on how thin you are. Eating disorders cause serious changes in a person's daily diet. People with eating disorders may use food to try to control overwhelming feelings. They may also obsess about their body shape or weight.



Anorexia often happens along with other conditions, such as:

- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Obsessive behaviors.
- Substance abuse.

Eating disorders usually start in the teen years. Women are more likely than men to have an eating disorder. But anyone can have one.

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Symptoms

Some people with anorexia lose weight mainly by not eating enough food. They may also try to lose weight by exercising a lot. Some people with anorexia binge and purge. This means that they may eat a lot of food in a short period of time and then vomit after eating. They may also misuse laxatives, diuretics or enemas.

A laxative is a drug that causes a bowel movement. A diuretic is a type of drug that causes the kidneys to make more urine. This rids the body of extra fluid and salt, which decreases weight. An enema is an injection of liquid through the anus into the large bowel. It causes a bowel movement.

Physical signs and symptoms of anorexia include:

- Too much weight loss.
- Thin appearance.
- Dizziness or fainting.
- Tiredness.

Anorexia may also cause:

- Abnormal blood counts.
- Constipation.
- Dehydration.

- Dry skin.

Constipation is a condition in which stool, also known as feces or poop, becomes hard, dry and hard to pass. Bowel movements don't happen often.

Dehydration is a condition caused by the loss of too much water from the body.

Symptoms of anorexia include:

- Irregular heart rhythms.
- Low blood pressure.
- Sleeping problems.
- Thinning hair that breaks or falls out.



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Anorexia may also lead to:

- Blue colored fingers.
- Soft, downy hair covering the body.
- Loss of periods in women.
- Osteoporosis.
- Swelling of arms or legs.

Osteoporosis is a condition that leads to lost bone mass and density. It causes bones to become weak and fragile. Anorexia can lead to serious complications. It may cause sudden death. If a person with anorexia becomes severely malnourished, every organ in the body can be harmed. These organs include the brain, heart and kidneys.

Anorexia can also cause you to:

- Feel cold.
- Constantly focus on food.
- Feel depressed or irritable.
- Fear gaining weight.
- Lose interest in sex.

Other signs of anorexia include:

- Refusal to eat.
- Denial of hunger.
- Lying about how much food has been eaten.
- Flat mood.
- Avoiding social situations.

Anorexia, like other eating disorders, can take over your life. You may think about food all the time or exercise until you are exhausted. Talk to a health care provider if you have symptoms of anorexia or if you think you may have an eating disorder. If you're hiding your anorexia from loved ones, try to find someone you can talk to. It may be hard to notice signs and symptoms of anorexia because people with anorexia often try to hide their thinness, eating habits or physical problems.



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A person with anorexia may:

- Skip meals or refuse to eat.
- Make excuses for not eating.
- Eat only certain foods, usually those low in fat and calories.
- Cut food into small pieces or spit food out after chewing.

A person with anorexia may also:

- Weigh their body often.
- Complain about being fat.
- Avoid eating in public.



Many people with anorexia don't want treatment, at least at first. If you are worried about someone, urge them to talk to a health care provider.

Causes

Anorexia is caused by a combination of factors. Some people are more likely to have anorexia because of their genes. The balance of certain chemicals in the brain may also play a role. People with obsessive-compulsive traits are more likely to stick to strict diets and go without food even though they are hungry. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is an anxiety condition. It causes a person to think certain thoughts over and over. They may feel driven to perform certain behaviors over and over again.

A person with anorexia may feel pressure from their culture to be thin. Peer pressure may also cause a person to want to lose weight or be thin. A person may receive positive comments from others if they lose weight or negative comments if they gain weight. Such changes and comments may trigger someone to start a strict diet.

Stress caused by transitions may also increase a person's risk for an eating disorder. Stressful transitions may include:

- A new school, home or job.
- A relationship breakup.
- The death or illness of a loved one.
- Other traumas.



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Diagnosis

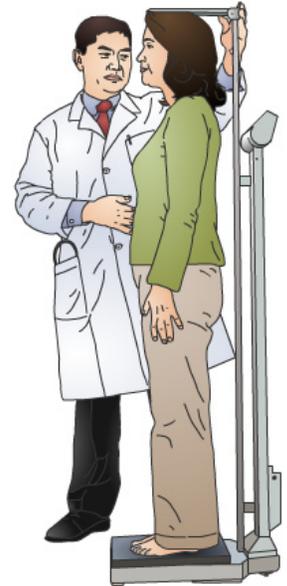
Your health care provider will perform a physical exam. They will measure your height and weight.

Your health care provider may take blood tests to check:

- The balance of electrolytes in your body.
- How well your liver, kidney and thyroid gland are working.

Your health care provider or a mental health care provider will ask you about your thoughts, feelings and eating habits. X-rays may be done to check for broken bones, pneumonia or heart problems.

An electrocardiogram may be done to look for heart problems. This test shows changes in the electrical activity of the heart over time. It can show problems such as blocked arteries, changes in electrolytes and changes in the way electrical currents pass through the heart tissue. Bone density testing may be done to check your bone health.



Treatment

Treatments for anorexia may include a combination of:

- Monitoring.
- Talk therapy.
- Nutritional counseling.
- Medicines.

Your health care provider may need to check your vital signs and other physical conditions often. In severe cases, people with anorexia may need a feeding tube to receive nutrition. The tube is placed in their nose and goes to the stomach. You can't recover from an eating disorder without reaching a healthy weight and getting enough nutrition. A psychologist can help you learn strategies to help you return to a healthy weight. A dietitian can help you keep a healthy diet. He or she can offer specific meal plans and calorie requirements that will help you meet your weight goals.



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Individual, family-based or group therapy may help a person with anorexia recover from the condition. Your health care provider may prescribe you antidepressants or other psychiatric medications. These can help treat symptoms of depression or anxiety. Your health care provider may also recommend vitamin and mineral supplements.

Treatment in a health care facility may be needed if you:

- Have medical complications.
- Have a psychological emergency.
- Are severely malnourished.
- Refuse to eat.



Some cases of anorexia are much more severe than others. Some people may not want treatment. They may think they don't need it or may be worried about weight gain.

Don't skip therapy sessions during your treatment. Stick to meal plans, even if they make you uncomfortable. Identify problem situations that may contribute to your anorexia. You can develop a plan to deal with them. Try not to weigh yourself or check yourself in the mirror often. Remind yourself what a healthy weight is for your body, especially at times when you see images that may make you want to avoid eating. Avoid pro-anorexia websites. These sites can encourage you to maintain dangerous habits and can trigger relapses.



Even if you do want to get better, anorexia can be hard to overcome. Anorexia is often an ongoing, lifelong battle. You may have a relapse during periods of high stress or during triggering situations. Ongoing or occasional therapy may help.

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Summary

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Some people with anorexia lose weight mainly by not eating enough food. They may also try to lose weight by exercising a lot. Some people with anorexia binge and purge. This means that they may eat a lot of food in a short period of time and then vomit after eating. They may also misuse laxatives, diuretics or enemas.

Physical signs and symptoms of anorexia include:

- Too much weight loss.
- Dizziness or fainting.
- Tiredness or sleeping problems.

Physical signs and symptoms of anorexia also include:

- Abnormal blood counts.
- Constipation or dehydration.
- Irregular heart rhythms.
- Low blood pressure.

Talk to a health care provider if you have symptoms of anorexia or if you think you may have an eating disorder. If you're hiding your anorexia from loved ones, try to find someone you can talk to.



Anorexia is caused by a combination of factors. Some people are more likely to have anorexia because of their genes. The balance of certain chemicals in the brain may also play a role. A person with anorexia may feel pressure from their culture to be thin. Anorexia can lead to serious complications. It may cause sudden death. Sudden death may be caused by abnormal heart rhythms. It could be caused by an imbalance of electrolytes that the body needs to be healthy.

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Other complications of anorexia include:

- Anemia.
- Heart problems.
- Bone loss.
- Loss of period in women.
- Gastrointestinal problems.
- Kidney problems.

Treatments for anorexia may include a combination of:

- Monitoring.
- Talk therapy.
- Nutritional counseling.
- Medicines.



You can't recover from an eating disorder without reaching a healthy weight and getting enough nutrition. A psychologist can help you learn strategies to help you return to a healthy weight. A dietitian can offer specific meal plans and calorie requirements that will help you meet your weight goals.

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