

# Anorexia Nervosa

## What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa is an eating problem that occurs when a person is extremely afraid of becoming overweight and therefore eats as little as possible. This condition is both a physical illness and a psychiatric illness. Hormone changes result from the low weight and low levels of body fat. In women menstruation can stop as a result of poor nutrition. Anorexia nervosa can be a very severe illness. Death may occur from starvation or suicide.

This illness occurs most often in young women. However, about 5% to 10% of people with anorexia nervosa are men.

## How does it occur?

The cause of anorexia nervosa isn't clear. A contributing factor in many cultures is the emphasis on equating female beauty with thinness.

Factors that increase the risk of developing anorexia nervosa include:

- a family history of anorexia nervosa or other eating disorders
- a family or personal history of mood disorders, such as major depression and bipolar disorder (manic depression).

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- weight loss, usually severe
- binge eating (eating large amounts of food in a short time) and/or purging (using laxatives or making yourself throw up)
- tiredness
- depressed or anxious mood
- insomnia
- if you are a woman, a loss of your monthly periods when your weight drops below a certain level.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider does a physical exam and medical history. He or she will investigate eating and other behavior patterns, such as:

- extreme selectiveness in choosing food that is low in calories
- binge eating
- purging, taking laxatives
- ritualistic eating
- overexercising
- denial of hunger and denial of any problem at all.

## How is it treated?

This can be a very difficult condition to treat. Individual psychotherapy and family therapy are usually necessary. Medication (especially medication effective in mood disorders) may be prescribed to help reduce the fear of becoming fat, reduce depression and anxiety, and aid in weight gain. You may need to be hospitalized if your condition is severe and life threatening.

**How long will the problem last?**

If you have anorexia, you may have symptoms for many years and will probably need ongoing treatment. Any stressful situation can cause a relapse. After you have reached a normal weight, you may need to continue psychotherapy or medication for months or years. In addition, you may be weighed regularly to make sure you continue eating properly.

**How can I take care of myself?**

In addition to following your provider's treatment plan and developing a support network, you can:

- Eat a nutritious, well-balanced diet.
- Moderate your exercise program.
- Get plenty of rest and sleep.
- Maintain a realistic weight for your height and body frame.
- Take mineral and vitamin supplements.
- See your health care provider regularly to have your weight checked.
- Keep an optimistic outlook.
- With your therapist, work out areas of conflict in your life.
- Balance your work with recreation and social activities.
- Learn to communicate your feelings.

**What can be done to help prevent anorexia nervosa and maintain good physical health?**

Acceptance of yourself and your body can help prevent this problem. In addition you can:

- Keep appointments with your health care provider or therapist.
- Avoid skipping meals.
- Avoid using laxatives.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.
- Avoid smoking cigarettes.

The [Student Counseling and Resource Services](#) (SCRS) staff, as well as the Student Care Center (SCC) providers can also help you in talking about your eating concerns. To make an appointment with a provider, call SCRS at 702-9800 or SCC at 702-4156.

In addition, the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) can provide answers to your questions. NMHA's toll-free number is 1-800-969-NMHA. The Web site address is <http://www.NMHA.org> .