

Anorexia Nervosa (AN)

What is Anorexia Nervosa?

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR), which is used to diagnose illnesses of a psychological nature, AN includes:

- Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height, for example, weight loss leading to maintenance of body weight less than 85% of that expected or failure to make expected weight gain during period of growth, leading to body weight less than 85% of that expected.
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight.
- Disturbance in the way one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight.
- The absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles (amenorrhea) (NB: If you meet the above criteria but are still having your periods, you might have Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified).

Types of Anorexia Nervosa:

The DSM further categorises AN into two types:

- Restricting Type: During the current episode of AN, the person has not regularly engaged in binge-eating or purging behaviour such as self-induced vomiting or misuse of laxatives or diuretics.
- Binge Eating/Purging Type: During the current episode of AN, the person has regularly engaged in binge-eating or purging behaviour.

Main characteristics of Anorexia Nervosa:

- Psychological disorder, distress, depression, and withdrawal
- Relentless pursuit to be thin and refusal to maintain minimal body weight for age/height
- Distorted body image – insisting overweight even when very thin. Body Dysmorphic Disorder
- Loss of periods (in girls)
- Grey skin tone, dark eyes, dry hair
- Long-term thinning of bones, which can lead to osteoporosis
- Malnutrition affects every organ and can cause problems with electrolytes, which can result in heart problems

What age range does this ED affect?

- Most common in people between 15-25 years of age
- Although it can affect any age, from as young as 7-8 years into old age

Does Anorexia Nervosa affect both men and women?

- The majority of sufferers are women
- Approximately 10 – 15% of sufferers are men

How Anorexia Nervosa sufferers may feel about themselves:

- Low self-esteem
- Insecure
- Unworthy - the thinner they are, the less of them there is to hate
- Anxious

Common character traits among those with Anorexia Nervosa:

- Successful/Intelligent (higher than average IQ)
- Creative
- Sensitive, kind and caring
- Perfectionist
- Shy and moral
- Compliant, obedient and eager to please

Possible reasons why someone might develop Anorexia Nervosa:

- A need to feel in control (perhaps because another aspect of their life is out of control)
- Fear of puberty and sexual maturity, concerns regarding sexuality
- A response to physical or sexual abuse
- A response to a stressful situation, e.g. divorce, long-term illness, academic expectations, bereavement, etc.
- Influenced by key person's relationship with food – Social Learning Theory
- Depression
- It is not due to wanting to commit suicide, although it may lead to death due to malnutrition

Effects of Anorexia Nervosa:

Physical:

- Extreme weight loss
- Constipation and abdominal pains
- Bloated face, puffy face and ankles
- Hair on the body (if sufferer is generally not hairy)
- Poor blood circulation and feeling cold
- Dry, rough and discoloured skin
- Loss of muscle mass
- Stunted growth in young men
- Low blood pressure, dizziness
- Loss of bone mass
- Loss of hair on the head
- Infertility
- Dehydration

Psychological:

- Lack of concentration and inability to make decisions due to lack of food
- Extreme fear of gaining weight and/or preoccupation with weight body shape
- Limiting food choice and counting calories
- Obsessive interest in food and what other people are eating
- Distorted perception of body shape and weight
- Reluctance to eat in front of other people
- Denial of the existence of the problem
- Changes in personality/mood swings

- Becoming aware of an 'inner voice'
- Depression

Behavioural:

- Over-exercising to aid weight loss
- Calorie counting and increased interest in food and cooking
- Abuse of laxatives and sometimes vomiting after food intake
- Obsessive ritualistic behaviours – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Secretive, manipulative behaviour to deny and protect anorexia
- Wearing baggy clothes to hide weight loss and disguise problem

What can make the situation worse?

- The situation can be exacerbated when others condemn their behaviour
- This can lead sufferers to feel even more need to gain control through food
- This also confirms their self-persecutory thoughts that they are worthless

Treatment for Anorexia Nervosa:

- **One-to-One Therapy - CBT, Interpersonal Psychotherapy, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy:** This can teach sufferers how to fight the compulsion to starve, exchange unhealthy habits for healthy ones, monitor eating and mood, and develop effective stress-management skills
- **Group Therapy/Support Groups:** Self-help diary/support groups such as Rebalance or family therapy
- **Education:** Learning about the dangers of AN, as well as how to eat right and make balanced meal plans
- **Medication:** Anti-depressants for low mood
- **Hospitalisation:** In extreme cases, in-patient treatment may be required

Note: Diagnosis of **Anorexia** (rather than Anorexia Nervosa) in an older person refers to a loss of appetite not associated with a dedicated pursuit of thinness or misperception of body size. This form of eating distress may be caused by physical or emotional reasons, e.g. illness, badly fitted dentures or effects of grief or loneliness.