

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

Anorexia Nervosa is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss.

Types of Anorexia :

Many individuals with anorexia will severely restrict their calories sometimes taking in only a few hundred calories a day or just water. This is called the RESTRICTING TYPE. Our bodies do not like to starve. Remember, the individual with anorexia has an appetite they just try to control it. It is very difficult when you are starving not to want to eat. What happens to many as a result is that they lose control they eat or eat something they feel they should not have eaten. For these individuals, this might mean something as simple as a cookie, a normal meal or even a binge. With the fear of gaining weight, they may vomit or exercise. This type of anorexia is called the BINGE-EATING/PURGING TYPE one of the most dangerous forms of an eating disorder.

Anorexia Nervosa has four **primary symptoms**:

1. Resistance to maintaining body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height

Anorexics are, on average, 15 % below ideal body weight. Not everyone who is of a low weight is anorexic; it is important to recognize that it is the REFUSAL to maintain a normal weight that is the key factor.

It is sometimes difficult in children to identify anorexia because for their height they may be of a normal weight. A possible complication of an eating disorder is stunted growth in children. A pediatrician will need to carefully monitor him/her with a growth chart. Also, young children may not talk about weight but rather may describe physical complaints such as nausea or feeling full.

2. Intense fear of weight gain or being “fat” even though underweight.

This intense fear is powerful enough to cause individuals to diet to the point of starvation. While the term anorexia means loss of appetite, this is not true of anorexia nervosa. A person with anorexia is hungry but he or she is afraid to eat because of the fear. Often specific foods are avoided especially those that are high in fat and calories. Often individuals will become vegetarians and want to eat healthily when indeed the issue is the fear of gaining weight. A person with anorexia constantly thinks about food--how many calories, how many fat grams, how much exercise do you need to do if you eat a cookie, etc. How many times do you check the scale?

There is always the attempt to try to control eating because of the fear of gaining weight. Often meals are avoided or eaten very slowly, pondering each bite, fearing that surely it will make them fat.

These thoughts begin to control a person's mind 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Your entire life can be centered on this one issue, depriving you of enjoying friends, fun and family.

3. Body Image Problems

When a person with anorexia looks into a mirror he/she does not often see an accurate reflection. A person with anorexia sees him/herself as fat, even if he/she is dangerously thin. This is a very frightening experience and feels very real- driving the person to diet. Sometimes a person with anorexia can accept that he/she is very thin but cannot accept how dangerous the situation really is. It is difficult for him/her to understand that a very low weight and dangerous dieting habits can actually be fatal. The death rate for anorexia is higher than for any other psychiatric illness.

4. Loss of menstrual periods in girls and women post-puberty.

Missing 3 periods is usually the criteria for this definition. This criteria cannot apply to situations where the person is a male, a young female who has not started her periods or a female who is on birth control pills.

Eating disorders experts have found that prompt intensive treatment significantly improves the chances of recovery. Therefore, it is important to be aware of some of the warning signs of anorexia nervosa.

Warning Signs of Anorexia Nervosa:

- Dramatic weight loss.
- Preoccupation with weight, food, calories, fat grams, and dieting.
- Refusal to eat certain foods, progressing to restrictions against whole categories of food (e.g. no carbohydrates, etc.).
- Frequent comments about feeling “fat” or overweight despite weight loss.
- Anxiety about gaining weight or being “fat.”
- Denial of hunger.
- Development of food rituals (e.g. eating foods in certain orders, excessive chewing, rearranging food on a plate).
- Consistent excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations involving food.
- Excessive, rigid exercise regimen--despite weather, fatigue, illness, or injury--the need to “burn off” calories taken in.
- Withdrawal from usual friends and activities.
- In general, behaviors and attitudes indicating that weight loss, dieting, and control of food are becoming primary concerns.

Anorexia nervosa involves self-starvation. The body is denied the essential nutrients it needs to function normally, so it is forced to slow down all of its processes to conserve energy. This “slowing down” can have serious medical consequences.

Health Consequences of Anorexia Nervosa:

- Abnormally slow heart rate and low blood pressure, which mean that the heart muscle is changing. The risk for heart failure rises as heart rate and blood pressure levels sink lower and lower.
- Reduction of bone density (osteoporosis), which results in dry, brittle bones.

- Muscle loss and weakness.
- Severe dehydration, which can result in kidney failure.
- Fainting, fatigue, and overall weakness.
- Dry hair and skin, hair loss is common.
- Growth of a downy layer of hair called lanugo all over the body, including the face, in an effort to keep the body warm.

Statistics about Anorexia Nervosa:

- Approximately 90-95% of anorexia nervosa sufferers are girls and women (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).
- Between 0.5-1% of American women suffer from anorexia nervosa.
- Anorexia nervosa is one of the most common psychiatric diagnoses in young women (Hsu, 1996).
- Between 5-20% of individuals struggling with anorexia nervosa will die. The probabilities of death increases within that range depending on the length of the condition (Zerbe, 1995).
- Anorexia nervosa has one of the highest death rates of any mental health condition.
- Anorexia nervosa typically appears in early to mid-adolescence.

Source: Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders
www.anad.org