

Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia nervosa, often called anorexia, is a type of eating disorder. People with anorexia eat so little that they have unhealthy weight loss and become dangerously thin. They may think they are overweight or fat even when they are underweight or thin. Anorexia affects more girls and women than boys and men. Anorexia is a serious health problem that can increase the risk of early death. But people with anorexia can get better with treatment.

Q: Who is at risk for anorexia?

A: Anorexia is more common among girls and women. Teen girls between 13 and 19 and young women in their early 20s are most at risk. But eating disorders are happening more often in older women. In one recent study, 13 percent of American women over 50 had signs of an eating disorder.

Q: What are the symptoms of anorexia?

A: Anorexia causes physical and psychological changes. A girl or woman with anorexia often looks very thin and may not act like herself.

Some other symptoms of anorexia include:

- Sadness
- Moodiness
- Confused or slow thinking
- Poor memory or judgment
- Thin, brittle hair and nails
- Feeling cold all the time because of a drop in internal body temperature
- Feeling faint, dizzy, or weak
- Feeling tired or sluggish
- Irregular periods or never getting a period
- Dry, blotchy, or yellow skin
- Growth of fine hair all over the body (called lanugo)
- Severe constipation or bloating
- Weak muscles or swollen joints

Girls or women with anorexia may also have behavior changes such as:

- Talking about weight or food all the time
- Not eating or eating very little
- Refusing to eat in front of others
- Not wanting to go out with friends
- Making herself throw up
- Taking laxatives or diet pills
- Exercising a lot

People with anorexia may also have other health problems, including depression, anxiety, or substance abuse.

Q: How does anorexia affect a woman's health?

A: With anorexia, your body doesn't get the energy that it needs from food, so it slows down and stops working normally. Over time, anorexia can affect your body in the following ways:

- Heart problems, including low blood pressure, a slower heart rate, irregular heartbeat, heart attack, and sudden death from heart problems

- Anemia (when your red blood cells do not carry enough oxygen to your body) and other blood problems
- Thinning of the bones (osteopenia or osteoporosis)
- Kidney stones or kidney failure
- Lack of periods, which can cause problems getting pregnant
- During pregnancy, a higher risk for miscarriage, cesarean delivery, or having a baby with low birth weight

Q: How is anorexia diagnosed?

A: Your doctor or nurse will ask you questions about your symptoms and medical history. It may be difficult to talk to a doctor or nurse about secret eating or exercise behaviors. Being honest about your eating and exercise behaviors is a good way to ask for help.

Q: How is anorexia treated?

A: Your doctor may refer you to a team of doctors, nutritionists, and therapists who will work to help you get better. Treatment plans may include nutrition therapy, psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”), support groups, or medicine like antidepressants.

For more information...

on anorexia, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

MentalHealth.gov, HHS

MentalHealth.gov

National Institute of Mental Health, NIH, HHS

866-615-6464 • www.nimh.nih.gov

Weight-control Information Network, NIDDK, NIH, HHS

877-946-4627 • www.win.niddk.nih.gov

American Psychological Association

800-374-2721 • www.apa.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

847-831-3438 • www.anad.org

National Eating Disorders Association

800-931-2237 • www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

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