

*Patient Education Sheet***What is Anorexia Nervosa?****What is anorexia nervosa?**

Anorexia is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder. It is characterized by:

- an unwillingness to maintain a healthy body weight
- a distorted body image
- excessive weight loss and extremely low body weight
- an intense fear of gaining weight
- absence of menstrual cycles in girls and women
- denial of the disorder and its seriousness

People with anorexia nervosa have disturbed eating behaviors and an ongoing preoccupation and obsession with weight control and food intake. They may diet and exercise excessively. In addition, in some cases, they may engage in compulsive overeating (binge eating) and purging behaviors, such as self-induced vomiting and misuse of laxatives.

Who is most affected by anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa primarily affects adolescent girls and young women, although it may also occur in females at any age as well as in boys and men. It has been estimated that anorexia nervosa affects approximately one in 100 females in the United States.

**What are common symptoms and signs of anorexia nervosa?**

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by both physical symptoms as well as behavioral signs.

Physical symptoms and signs may include:

- Rapid weight loss
- Unusually thin, emaciated appearance
- Brittle hair and nails
- Absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles in females who have previously regularly menstruated (amenorrhea)
- New growth of soft, downy hair covering the body (called lanugo)
- Dry skin
- A drop in body temperature (hypothermia), causing a feeling of often being cold
- Severe constipation
- Dehydration

Behavioral signs may include:

- Continual dieting even when weight is extremely low
- Preoccupation with food, calories, recipes, and nutrition
- Unusual eating rituals, e.g., cutting food into extremely small pieces, eating only certain foods, refusing or being reluctant to eat in front of others or in social settings
- Obsessive exercising

- Inability to realistically assess their body weight (distorted body image), seeing themselves as fat although extremely underweight
- Excessive monitoring of weight



- Frequent use of laxatives, diuretics, enemas, and/or diet pills
- Consistently wearing loose, layered clothing

Symptoms of other psychiatric conditions may also be present in association with anorexia nervosa, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive behaviors, and/or substance abuse.

Are there complications associated with anorexia?

Without treatment, anorexia nervosa may lead to potentially life-threatening complications, including:

- Damage to vital organs, including the heart, kidneys, and brain
- Irregular heart rhythms
- Calcium loss from bones, causing thinning (osteoporosis) and risk of fracture
- Slowed breathing
- Low blood pressure and pulse
- Electrolyte imbalances

The most frequent causes of death are complications secondary to malnutrition and suicide.

For more information, or to learn about the specialized services and programs available at Western Connecticut Health Network, please visit www.WCHN.org

What causes anorexia nervosa?

The causes of anorexia nervosa remain unknown. However, it is thought to be caused by a number of complex factors, including **genetic, psychological, environmental, and societal**. Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa, tend to occur more frequently when other family members have also been affected.



In addition, research suggests that certain personality traits often seen in those with the disorder, such as perfectionism and a tendency toward anxiety, may prove to be risk factors. It is also thought that stressful life events may serve as environmental triggers in people with genetic risk factors (i.e., genetic predisposition) for anorexia nervosa. Many have suggested that modern society's preoccupation with thinness may also be a contributing factor.

Is there any treatment for anorexia nervosa?

People with anorexia nervosa may require coordinated, multidisciplinary treatment and a number of therapeutic approaches, such as the following:

- **Psychotherapy** may be advised to help an affected individual learn how to

exchange unhealthy habits with healthy ones, develop problem-solving skills, explore healthful ways to cope with stressful situations, and monitor mood. Such treatment may include one-on-one sessions with a therapist, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and family therapy.

- **Nutrition education** – A dietician or other health care provider can provide information about a healthy diet and help to design an eating plan to achieve a healthy weight and appropriate eating habits.



- **Hospitalization** – If a person with anorexia has serious complications and continues to refuse to eat or gain weight, a doctor may recommend hospitalization to ensure sufficient weight gain. Some clinics specialize specifically in treating people with eating disorders like anorexia. In other cases, outpatient day programs may be considered appropriate rather than full hospitalization.
- **Medication** – Medication cannot cure an eating disorder, but may be recommended to help manage depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric conditions that may be associated with anorexia nervosa.

Sources:

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