

What Is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder that involves a serious disturbance in the way a person deals with food, weight, and body image.

The main feature of anorexia nervosa is to lose weight and keep the weight off even though it may not be healthy for that person. The loss of weight is accompanied by changes in behavior, emotions, thinking, perceptions, and the person's interactions with their friends and family.

Food and eating is constantly on the mind of a person with anorexia nervosa with the weight being kept off by constantly dieting and exercising more than is needed. A person with anorexia often believes that being thinner means they are more beautiful and successful. They feel better about themselves if they are thin and controlling their eating means they are in control of their life.

What Are The Warning Signs And Symptoms?

The main criteria necessary for the diagnosis of anorexia nervosa are:

- Excessive weight loss or lack of normal weight gain, often to the point of starvation;
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat;
- Distorted image of body weight or shape; and
- Absence of at least three menstrual periods in a row in females.

The following are common behaviors that occur in anorexia nervosa:

- Significant reduction of the amount of food eaten.
- Avoiding eating; skipping meals.
- Intense focusing on food, eating, and body weight and shape.
- Repeatedly weighing oneself.
- Denial of hunger.

- Rigid eating patterns, such as extreme controlling of calories and fat even when underweight.
- Unusual rituals at mealtimes, such as cutting food into tiny pieces, moving food around the plate, and throwing out food so it does not have to be eaten.
- Wearing baggy clothes to hide the amount of weight lost.
- Obvious fear or anxiety before eating and guilt after eating.
- Complaining of bloating and unusual fullness after eating only small amounts of food.
- Excessive or compulsive exercising.

Binge Eating And Purging

Most people with anorexia nervosa also binge eat and purge to keep their body weight low.

Binge eating means eating a large amount of food (more than one would normally eat) within a certain amount of time.

Purging means getting rid of the food that was eaten by making oneself vomit or by misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas.

How Is Anorexia Nervosa Diagnosed?

The diagnosis and evaluation process usually begins with a detailed interview with the person with anorexia nervosa and family members.

Questions are usually asked about:

- Weight history.
- Eating patterns.
- Concerns about weight and shape.
- Dieting and weight-losing behaviors.

- Whether or not **binge eating** has been a problem.
- Problems in the family or other relationships.
- Physical and psychological symptoms that occurred before the disorder started.
- Physical and psychological symptoms that have occurred since it started.

Diagnosis may also involve a person being medically evaluated in order to assess the physical problems that may have resulted from weight loss, vomiting, and laxative abuse.

It is important to rule out other possible physical explanations for the weight loss and become aware of other physical problems that may affect how the person is treated.

NOTE:

Information on this topic was sourced from various online sources. See the links page on the Childline SA website for more resources.