



FEEDING AND EATING DISORDERS

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

What it is:

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder in which individuals severely restrict the amount of food or kilojoules they consume. Individuals with this disorder typically experience severe weight loss, although in children or adolescents it may present as a failure to make developmentally expected weight gain or bodily growth. Both men and women are at risk for developing this disorder.

The individual's body weight will typically be significantly low, and this is most commonly judged using the Body Mass Index system. An individual with a BMI of 17kg/m² or less is considered to be moderately to severely thin. Individuals with anorexia nervosa have an intense fear of becoming fat or gaining weight, and it may be that the more weight they lose, the more intense this fear becomes. This is because their perception of their body and weight becomes distorted. Certain individuals will feel their entire body is fat, while others may acknowledge that overall they are skinny, but still feel that they have certain problem areas such as their stomach or legs that need to be thinner. The self-esteem of individuals with this disorder is highly dependent on their own perception of their bodily appearance.

Apart from starvation, some individuals with the disorder may engage in purging behaviour when they do eat, such as causing themselves to vomit after eating, or using laxatives. Others may exercise excessively in an attempt to lose or control their weight. These behaviours can have life threatening consequences. The nutritional deficiency associated with anorexia nervosa can lead to serious major organ damage, as well as loss of bone density. Depression, social withdrawal, insomnia, irritability and obsessive-compulsive behaviours are also associated with the disorder.



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Common symptoms:

1. Restricting the amount of food or kilojoules consumed to levels that are below what is required for healthy functioning
2. An intense fear of gaining weight or of being fat
3. Persistent behaviour that prevents weight gain, even if the individual is at a very low weight
4. The individual has a distorted view of their body shape and weight, always perceiving themselves as having weight to lose even when they are underweight

Causes:

Children who develop anxiety disorders or display obsessional traits are at an increased risk to develop anorexia nervosa. Cultures, settings and occupations that encourage and value thinness have also been seen to have a higher prevalence of the disorder. First degree relatives of an individual with anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa also have an increased risk of developing the disorder.

Remember to always consult a mental health or medical practitioner regarding any questions you may have about a mental health diagnosis and treatment options.

This factsheet is based on information obtained from the DSM-5:
American Psychiatric Association, 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.*