

# Understanding Anorexia Nervosa



Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder that can happen to anyone, but mostly affects young women. It can threaten your health, your well-being, and even your life. Much about anorexia isn't fully understood. But it can be treated. Talk to your healthcare provider or a mental health professional. They can help.

## What is anorexia?

If you have anorexia, you likely have a false image of your body. No matter how thin you are, you may see yourself as fat. And you may try almost anything to lose weight. You might eat very small amounts of food. You might even weigh each bite. Or you might not eat at all. To burn more calories, you might exercise too much and too often. But without enough fuel, your body starts to starve. Over time, you may lose 15 % or more of your total weight. As a result, you may feel cold all the time. Your menstrual periods may stop. And your muscles may start to waste away. Sadly, some women with anorexia die—often of heart disease.

## Symptoms of anorexia

- A low body weight defined as a BMI (body mass index) of less than 18.5
- Extremely restricted eating
- Extreme thinness (emaciation)
- Weight loss of 15% or more of body weight
- Relentless pursuit of thinness
- Fear of gaining weight, if you're very thin
- Lack of menstrual periods (in women)
- Problems with digestion, energy, memory, and concentration
- Growth of fine hair all over the body (lanugo)
- Thinning of the bones (osteopenia or osteoporosis)
- Mild anemia and muscle wasting and weakness
- Feeling cold all the time
- Loss of sex drive
- Dental cavities
- Hair loss
- Dry skin
- Severe constipation

## Who does it affect?

Anorexia can affect anyone, including men. But it's most common in young, white women. It's more common in people who do activities that value thinness, such as modeling, ballet, gymnastics, and other sports. The causes are not known. But they probably include traits you are born with, lessons you learn growing up, and the

values of society. People with anorexia are often concerned with being perfect. Many feel pressured to succeed by parents, coaches, teachers, or on their own. Some have a hard time coping with stress. People with anorexia are also more likely to have depression.

## Getting treatment

It can be hard to admit you have an eating disorder. In fact, you may not even notice how thin you are. You may keep trying to lose weight. You may also try to hide your problem from others. But in most cases, anorexia won't go away on its own. Fortunately, treatment often can help. The first step is to confide in someone you trust. You don't have to deal with anorexia alone.

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