

Symptoms

Anorexia nervosa

— Symptoms

— [Treatment](#)

Anorexia is an eating disorder. It is a serious mental health condition.

People who have anorexia try to keep their weight as low as possible. They do this by not eating enough food or exercising too much, or both. This can make them very ill because their body is starved of the food it needs to keep them safe and healthy.

Men and women of any age can get anorexia, but it's most common in young women. It usually starts in the mid-teens.

Signs and symptoms

The main symptom of anorexia is losing more weight than is healthy for your age and height.

Signs and symptoms include:

- deliberately missing meals, eating very little, or avoiding eating any foods you see as fattening
- lying about what and when you've eaten, and how much you weigh
- taking medicine that makes you feel less hungry (appetite suppressants)
- exercising too much
- making yourself sick
- using medicines to help you poo (laxatives) or to make you pee (diuretics) to try to avoid putting on weight
- an overwhelming fear of gaining weight
- strict rituals around eating
- seeing losing a lot of weight as a positive thing
- believing you are fat when you are a healthy weight or underweight
- not admitting your weight loss is serious

You may also notice physical signs and symptoms such as:

- if you're under 18, your weight and height being lower than expected for your age

- if you're an adult, having an unusually low body mass index (BMI)
- your periods stopping
- your periods not starting (in younger women and girls)
- bloating, constipation and abdominal pain
- headaches or problems sleeping
- feeling cold, dizzy or very tired
- poor circulation in hands and feet
- dry skin, hair loss from the scalp, or fine downy hair (lanugo) growing on your body
- reduced sex drive

People with anorexia often have other mental health problems. For example, [depression](#) or [anxiety](#).

Warning signs of anorexia in someone else

The following warning signs could show that someone else has anorexia:

- dramatic weight loss
- lying about how much and when they've eaten, or how much they weigh
- avoiding eating with others
- cutting their food into small pieces
- eating very slowly to disguise how little they are eating
- trying to hide how thin they are by wearing loose or baggy clothes
- weighing themselves often
- drinking more fluids

Warning signs of anorexia in children:

- Growth spurt may be delayed
- Weight gain may be less than expected
- Periods not starting

Complications of anorexia

Anorexia can lead to severe health problems associated with malnutrition (not eating enough healthy food). But these will usually start to improve once your eating habits return to normal.

Possible complications include:

- problems with muscles and bones - feeling tired and weak, osteoporosis or physical development
- fertility problems
- loss of sex drive
- problems with the heart and blood vessels

- problems with the brain and nerves - such as fits, difficulties with concentration and memory
- kidney or bowel problems
- having a weakened immune system or anaemia

Anorexia can also put your life at risk. It's one of the leading causes of deaths related to mental health problems. Deaths from anorexia may be due to physical complications or suicide.

Causes of anorexia

It's not known what causes anorexia and other eating disorders.

You may be more likely to get an eating disorder if:

- you or a member of your family has a history of eating disorders, depression, or alcohol or drug addiction
- you have been criticised for your eating habits, body shape or weight
- you are very concerned about being slim
- you have anxiety, low self-esteem, or an obsessive personality
- you are a perfectionist and compare your body to other people's, always believing that their body shape is better than yours
- you have been sexually abused

Getting help

If you think you may have anorexia, even if you are not sure, see your GP as soon as you can.

If a family member or friend may have anorexia, let them know you're worried about them.

Encourage them to see their GP. You could offer to go along with them.

[For more support and information about anorexia nervosa visit bodywhys.ie](https://bodywhys.ie)

Content supplied by the [NHS](https://www.nhs.uk) and adapted for Ireland by the HSE

Page last reviewed: 1 September 2022

Next review due: 1 September 2025

HSE Live - we're here to help

Monday to Friday: 8am to 8pm

Saturday: 9am to 5pm

Sunday: Closed

Bank holidays: Closed

Freephone: [1800 700 700](tel:1800700700)

From outside Ireland: [00 353 1 240 8787](tel:0035312408787)

[HSE Facebook](#)

[HSE Instagram](#)

[HSE TikTok](#)

[HSE YouTube](#)

[HSE LinkedIn](#)

[HSE X \(Twitter\)](#)

[Complaints and feedback](#)

[Emergencies](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Cookie statement](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy statement](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

© Health Service Executive