



**Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association**  
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## What is Anorexia Nervosa ?

### DEFINITION

ANOREXIA NERVOSA is an emotional disorder characterized by intense fear of fat that results in extreme dieting. It is the loss of at least 15% of normal body weight or a failure to reach within 15% of the normally expected weight. It affects mostly women between the ages of 12 and 24. Sometimes older women, and boys or men have also been known to struggle with Anorexia Nervosa. Low self-esteem, a distorted body image, and an obsession with food are other distinguishing features. The relentless pursuit of thinness results in death in as many as 10 to 15% afflicted with the disorder.

### SIGNS

Noticeable weight loss occurs in a short period of time, usually within three months. Increased selectivity of diet, leads to an obsession with food, recipes, and endless hours of punishing exercise. Although starving, the individual denies feeling hungry. Hunger may not be recognized because of the unusual amount of water consumed. She/he may begin to feel a false sense of control when resisting the urge to eat, and out of control of other areas of her/his life. Perfectionism and unrealistic expectations for personal achievement are examples of the rigidity and severe attempts to maintain control by persons with Anorexia Nervosa. Some may periodically binge because of prolonged starvation; others may purge whatever is consumed, as an attempt to avoid weight gain.

### EFFECTS

Starvation causes chronic constipation alternating with diarrhea; dry pasty skin; depression; irritability; and distorted body image. A lack of adequate body fat results in always feeling cold; fine downy hair may begin to grow on parts of the body. Menstruation stops in females, due to lack of body fat; in males, there is a decrease in libido. Internal organs are weakened, and the body begins to shut down to conserve energy. Despite these conditions, persons with Anorexia Nervosa may continue to strive to perform day-to-day activities with bursts of energy. They will eventually have faintness, weakness, irregular heartbeats, and may pass out due to extreme exhaustion and fatigue.

### CHARACTERISTICS

Avoiding food is a method of coping with overwhelming emotions. For the anorexic, food and feelings are the same. Feelings cannot be determined from hunger and fullness. Anorexics are described as deceitful, withdrawn, and lose their ability to concentrate and make decisions accurately, these are generally caused by the effects of starvation. In as many as 50% of the cases with Anorexia Nervosa, there is a history of sexual abuse. The starvation delays adult maturity and sexual development. Food has a specialized meaning: punishment, love, anger, positive reinforcement for good behaviour, method of control, etc.

### TREATMENTS

A combination of therapy is most helpful. Medical attention to monitor health; medication is sometimes used to treat depression. Counselling helps to change dysfunctional thinking and beliefs about oneself, and to instill the will to live and reasons to recover. Nutritional education helps to develop a healthy eating plan. Support groups are also effective in helping individuals.

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