

## What is Anorexia?

Anorexia nervosa, typically called anorexia, is a type of eating disorder that mainly affects girls and young women. A person with this disorder has an intense fear of gaining weight and limits the food she eats. She:

- has a low body weight
- refuses to keep a normal body weight
- is extremely afraid of becoming fat
- believes she is fat even when she's very thin
- misses three (menstrual) periods in a row—for girls/women who have started having their periods.

## What causes it?

Anorexia is more than just a problem with food. It's a way of using food or starving oneself to feel more in control of her life and to ease tension, anger, and anxiety. We do not know exactly what causes anorexia, but several things may contribute to the development of the disorder:

- **Biology**--Genetics and other related hormones, may contribute in the onset the disorder.
- **Culture**—The mass media in the United States focuses on *the thinner the better*.
- **Personal feelings**--Someone with anorexia may feel badly about herself, feel helpless, and hate the way she looks. She has unrealistic expectations of herself and strives for perfection. She feels worthless, despite achievements and perceives a social pressure to be thin.
- **Stressful events**-- Things like starting a new school or job or being teased to traumatic events like rape can lead to the onset of anorexia.
- **Families**--People with a mother or sister with anorexia are more likely to develop the disorder. Parents who think appearance is very

important, diet themselves, and criticize their children's bodies are more likely to have a child with anorexia.

## What are signs of anorexia?

A person with anorexia will have many of these signs:

- Looks a lot thinner
- Uses extreme measures to lose weight
  - makes herself throw up
  - takes pills to urinate or have a bowel movement (BM)
  - takes diet pills
  - doesn't eat or follows a strict diet
  - exercises a lot
  - weighs food and counts calories
  - moves food around the plate; doesn't eat it
- Has a distorted body image
  - thinks she's fat when she's too thin
  - wears baggy clothes to hide appearance
  - fears gaining weight
  - weighs herself many times a day
- Acts differently

- talks about weight and food all the time
- won't eat in front of others
- acts moody or depressed
- doesn't socialize

## What happens to your body with anorexia?

The body doesn't get the energy from foods that it needs, so it slows down. Look at the picture to find out how anorexia affects your health.

## Can someone with anorexia get better?

Yes. People with this disorder can get better. The treatment depends on what the person needs. The person must get back to a healthy weight. Many times, eating disorders happen with other problems, like [depression](#) and anxiety problems. These problems are treated along with the anorexia and may involve medicines that help reduce feelings of depression and anxiety.

## Can women who had anorexia in the past still get pregnant?

It depends. Women who have fully recovered from anorexia have a better chance of getting pregnant. While a woman has active anorexia, she does not get her usual period and doesn't normally ovulate, so it would be harder to get pregnant. However, she may get pregnant as she regains weight because her reproductive system is getting back to normal. After they gain back some weight, some women may skip or miss their periods, which can cause problems getting pregnant. If this happens, a woman should see her doctor.

## What should I do if I think someone I know has anorexia?

1. **Set a time to talk**--Set aside a time to privately talk about your concerns with your friend. Be open and honest. Make sure you talk in a place away from distractions.
2. **Tell your friend about your concerns**--Tell your friend about specific times when you were worried about her eating or exercise behaviors. Explain that you think these things may show a problem that needs professional help.
3. **Ask your friend talk about these concerns**--She could talk to a counselor or doctor who knows about eating issues. If you feel comfortable, offer to help your friend make an appointment or go with her to her appointment.
4. **Avoid conflicts or a battle of the wills with your friend**--If your friend doesn't admit to a problem, repeat your feelings and the reasons for them. Be a supportive listener.
5. **Don't place shame, blame, or guilt on your friend**--Do not use accusatory "you" statements like, "You just need to eat." Or, "You are acting irresponsibly." Instead, use "I" statements like, "I'm concerned about you because you refuse to eat breakfast or lunch." Or, "It makes me afraid to hear you vomiting."
6. **Avoid giving simple solutions**--Don't say, "If you'd just stop, then everything would be fine!"
7. **Express your continued support**--Remind your friend that you care and want her to be healthy and happy.

### **For more information...**

**National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), NIH, HHS**

Phone: (866) 615-NIMH (6464)

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

**Weight-control Information Network (WIN), NIDDK, NIH, HHS**

Phone: (877) 946-4627

Internet Address: <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm>

**Academy for Eating Disorders (AED)**

Phone: (703) 556-9222

Internet Address: <http://www.aedweb.org>

**Harvard Eating Disorders Center (HEDC)**

Phone: (617) 236-7766

Internet Address: <http://www.hedc.org>

**National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders  
(ANAD)**

Phone: (847) 831-3438

Internet Address: <http://www.anad.org>

**National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)**

Phone: (800) 931-2237

Internet Address: <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>