

Andrea has struggled in her freshman year of college. Everything has gotten so much harder and she feels like she doesn't have any control over her life anymore. She begins to develop an intense fear of gaining weight, so she starts a diet in which she only eats a few pieces of food everyday. She constantly counts calories and worries about gaining weight. She also starts obsessively going to the gym, even if it means sacrificing her sleep and other activities. She loves when people tell her she looks skinnier, but she still feels like she needs to lose more weight in order to be successful. Her eating habits, however, have left her fatigued and irritable, and just recently she stopped menstruating.

-----Anorexia Nervosa-----

What Is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia is a refusal to maintain minimal body weight, within 15 percent of an individual's normal weight. If you have an intense fear of gaining weight, you may have a distorted image of your body, which makes you think you need to lose weight when you really do not.

Characteristics

- An intense fear of weight gain
- amenorrhea (absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles)
- recurrent binge eating and purging episodes
- obsessive exercise

Who Is at risk?

- Those who are pre- or post-puberty
- Those who have undergone any major life change
- Young adult women and adolescent girls

****Athletes, actors, dancers, and models are at special risk for developing anorexia****

What Causes Anorexia?

- Heredity: genetic factors may predispose some people to developing anorexia
- Behavioral and environmental influences
- Stressful events like: moving, starting a new school, stress in the family environment such as a new sibling or parents' divorce
- Biological factors: diminished or excessive production of lower or higher levels of certain neurotransmitters in the brain

What Type of Treatment Is Available?

- Weight restoration: weight gain between one and three pounds per week

- Individual, group, and family therapies can help treat the disorder as well. Therapy is used to deal with underlying emotional issues and change abnormal thoughts or behaviors
- Medications can help restore correct levels of chemicals in the body
- Nutritional counseling can help in establishing proper diet and eating regimens

****Most of the complications that result from anorexia (abnormal heart rhythms, depletion of white blood cells, dehydration, etc.) are reversible and do not appear after the person is restored back to a normal weight****

I Think My Friend Has an Eating Disorder; How Can I Tell and What Should I Do?

If someone you know exhibits the following behavior, you should encourage them to seek help:

- an intense fear of gaining weight
- extensive weight loss
- an ongoing preoccupation with weight and food despite being thin
- obsessive exercise
- brittle nails and hair; dry, yellow skin
- depression
- complaints of feeling cold
- strange eating habits (for example: cutting food into tiny pieces, refusing to eat in front of others, and fixing elaborate meals for others while not eating it themselves)
- low self-esteem, social isolation, and perfectionism

Warning: Regular or heavy alcohol use can worsen most psychological states, such as anxiety, depression, bipolar, schizophrenia, or eating problems. Alcohol can change the way a person feels in the short run; however, the overall effect only worsens a disorder. Marijuana and other drugs can have similar or more serious effects on the brain.

For further help, you can call the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) Hotline: 847-831-3438 or visit www.anad.org
National Alliance on Mental Illness www.nami.org 1-800-950-NAMI
National Institute of Mental Health www.nimh.nih.gov
Screening for Mental Health www.mentalhealth.org
American College Counseling Association www.collegecounseling.org
National Panhellenic Conference www.npcwomen.org
National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS) www.nopcas.org
National Latino Behavioral Health Association www.nlbha.org
National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association www.naapimha.org

Updated January 2006

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, MD, Medical Director, NAMI

Permission is granted for this fact sheet to be reproduced in its entirety, but the NAMI name, service mark, and contact information must be included.