

# Eating Disorders: Anorexia



## Fresh Start Counseling

### **Anorexia nervosa**

When you have anorexia nervosa (an-o-REK-see-uh nur-VOH-suh), you're obsessed with food and being thin, sometimes to the point of deadly self-starvation.

Anorexia signs and symptoms may include:

- Refusing to eat and denying hunger
- An intense fear of gaining weight
- Negative or distorted self-image
- Excessively exercising
- Flat mood or lack of emotion
- Preoccupation with food
- Social withdrawal
- Thin appearance
- Dizziness or fainting
- Soft, downy hair present on the body (lanugo)
- Menstrual irregularities or loss of menstruation (amenorrhea)
- Constipation
- Abdominal pain
- Dry skin
- Frequently being cold
- Irregular heart rhythms
- Low blood pressure
- Dehydration

The exact cause of eating disorders is unknown. As with other mental illnesses, there may be many causes. Possible causes of eating disorders include:

- **Biology.** There may be genes that make certain people more vulnerable to developing eating disorders. People with first-degree relatives — siblings or parents — with an eating disorder may be more likely to develop an eating disorder too, suggesting a possible genetic link. In addition, there's some evidence that serotonin, a naturally occurring brain chemical, may influence eating behaviors.
- **Psychological and emotional health.** People with eating disorders may have psychological and emotional problems that contribute to the disorder. They may have low self-esteem, perfectionism, impulsive behavior, anger management difficulties, family conflicts and troubled relationships.
- **Society.** The modern Western cultural environment often cultivates and reinforces a desire for thinness. Success and worth are often equated with being thin in popular culture. Peer pressure and what people see in the media may fuel this desire to be thin, particularly among young girls.

### Risk factors

Certain situations and events might increase the risk of developing an eating disorder. These risk factors may include:

- **Being female.** Teenage girls and young women are more likely than teenage boys and young men to have eating disorders.
- **Age.** Although eating disorders can occur across a broad age range — from pre-adolescents to older adults — they are much more common during the teens and early 20s.

- **Family history.** Eating disorders are significantly more likely to occur in people who have parents or siblings who've had an eating disorder.
- **Family influences.** People who feel less secure in their families, whose parents and siblings may be overly critical, or whose families tease them about their appearance are at higher risk of eating disorders.
- **Emotional disorders.** People with depression, anxiety disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorder are more likely to have an eating disorder.
- **Dieting.** People who lose weight are often reinforced by positive comments from others and by their changing appearance. This may cause some people to take dieting too far, leading to an eating disorder.
- **Transitions.** Whether it's heading off to college, moving, landing a new job or a relationship breakup, change can bring emotional distress, which may increase your susceptibility to an eating disorder.
- **Sports, work and artistic activities.** Athletes, actors and television personalities, dancers, and models are at higher risk of eating disorders. Eating disorders are particularly common among ballerinas, gymnasts, runners and wrestlers. Coaches and parents may unwittingly contribute to eating disorders by encouraging young athletes to lose weight.

### Complications

Eating disorders cause a wide variety of complications, some of them life-threatening. The more severe or long lasting the eating disorder, the more likely you are to experience serious complications. Complications may include:

- Death

- Heart disease
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts or behavior
- Absence of menstruation (amenorrhea)
- Bone loss
- Stunted growth
- Seizures
- Digestive problems
- Bowel irregularities
- Kidney damage
- Severe tooth decay
- High or low blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Gallbladder disease

### Preparing for your appointment

Treatment of an eating disorder generally includes a team approach comprised of medical providers, mental health providers and dietitians, all with experience in eating disorders.

Here's some information to help you get ready for your appointments, and what you might expect from your doctor and other health providers.

### What you can do

- **Write down any symptoms you're experiencing**, including any that may seem unrelated to the reason for which you scheduled the appointment.

- **Write down key personal information**, including any major stresses or recent life changes.
- **Make a list of all medications**, as well as any vitamins or supplements, that you're taking.
- **Ask a family member or friend to come with you**, if possible. Sometimes it can be difficult to remember all of the information provided to you during an appointment. Someone who accompanies you may remember something that you missed or forgot. A family member may also be able to give your doctor a fuller picture of your home life.
- **Write down questions to ask your doctor** so you'll remember to cover everything you wanted to.


Some potential questions you might want to ask your doctor or other health care provider include:

- What kinds of tests do I need? Do these tests require any special preparation?
- Is this condition temporary or long lasting?
- What treatments are available, and which do you recommend?
- Do I need to gain weight as part of my treatment?
- Will my periods begin again?
- Are there any brochures or other printed material that I can take home with me? What Web sites do you recommend visiting?

In addition to the questions that you've prepared to ask, don't hesitate to ask questions of any of your providers anytime that you don't understand something.

### What to expect from your doctor

Your doctor or other health care provider is



likely to ask you a number of questions, such as:

- How long have you been worried about your weight?
- Do you exercise? How often do you exercise and for how long?
- Have you found any other ways to lose weight?
- Are you having any physical symptoms?
- Have you ever vomited because you were uncomfortably full?
- Have others expressed concern that you're too thin?
- Do you think about food often?
- Do you ever eat in secret?
- Have any of your family members ever had symptoms of an eating disorder or have any been diagnosed with an eating disorder?