

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Anorexia

Anorexia is a serious medical condition, not just a phase or a fad. It can damage your health and put your life in danger. Getting help is the most difficult but important step you can take. Treatments can help you feel better about yourself so that anorexia does not take over your life.

What is it?

If you have anorexia, you have an intense fear about how your body looks and how much you weigh. You think you are fat even when you are underweight.

Anorexia is also about how you feel about yourself. If you have anorexia you can't see that you are very underweight. You may feel deeply unhappy. Starving yourself can seem like a way to control difficult emotions and stress. You may think that losing weight is the key to a better, happier and more successful life.

You may not understand the way you behave. You may feel ashamed and guilty about it but tell yourself there's nothing wrong. But anorexia is harmful. You can die from starving yourself.

If you're worried someone you know has anorexia, see our anorexia information that's written for carers.

What are the symptoms?

If you have anorexia, you probably know what the symptoms are. They have been a major part of your life for months or even years.

You are underweight and you eat very little. You may feel distressed around mealtimes and avoid eating. You worry excessively about your weight. And to avoid putting on weight you may exercise for hours, take laxatives (drugs that make you go to the toilet) and make yourself vomit. You may also feel very unhappy.

Anorexia can affect your health in many different ways. You may:

- Stop having periods if you're female
- Feel tired and weak, and have aching muscles
- Get dizzy spells, feel short of breath and feel your heart beating hard (get palpitations)
- Have fine, downy hair on your body and face
- Get cold easily, especially in your hands and feet
- Start to lose your hair
- Get constipated
- Feel full and sometimes get stomach pains after eating only a little food

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- Get dehydrated, which makes you feel thirsty, sick and exhausted
- Get dry, yellowish skin.

If you make yourself vomit your teeth may become discoloured. You may also get heartburn and have rough patches of skin on your knuckles.

Having anorexia for a long time can lead to serious heart problems, such as abnormal heart rhythms and heart failure. It can also cause thin bones, fertility problems (difficulty getting pregnant and keeping a pregnancy), headaches and problems with vision.

What treatments work?

To recover from anorexia, you'll need to do three important things: start to eat more food, put on weight, and change how you think about yourself and food.

There has been very little good research about treatments for anorexia, so it's difficult to say for certain what will work. One thing that the research does show is that you are more likely to get better if you get treatment early. But even if you've had anorexia for a long time it's important to seek help. The longer you starve yourself, the more harmful it is for your body.

- Doctors agree that **getting advice and support from professionals** can help you put on weight. You'll be given advice about what to eat and be monitored carefully. And you'll be given vitamin and mineral supplements if you need them. Studies show that people with anorexia and staff treating them prefer a more relaxed approach to gaining weight, rather than one which is very strict. And you're just as likely to gain weight with an easy-going approach. A relaxed approach is one where you won't be denied the things you enjoy, like going shopping with friends, if you don't put on a set amount of weight each week.
- **Talking treatments (psychotherapy)** often seem to help people with anorexia, although more research is needed to say for sure. Family therapy, where you see a therapist with other family members, has been shown to help people gain weight. Cognitive behaviour therapy may also be helpful. This looks at how your thoughts and beliefs affect your symptoms and behaviour.
- **Being treated in hospital** is crucial for some people with anorexia. But most people do just as well living at home and visiting a clinic.
- There hasn't been any good research to show whether being treated with **antidepressants or other drugs** helps people with anorexia.

What can I do to help myself?

The best thing you can do is to ask for help. This may feel very difficult because you don't think there is anything wrong.

But if you answer "yes" to some of the questions below, you may be more concerned about food and eating than is healthy, and you may have an eating disorder.

- Do you make yourself vomit because you feel uncomfortably full?

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- Do you worry you've lost control over how much you eat?
- Have you recently lost more than 6 kilograms (about one stone) in three months?
- Do you think you are fat even when others say you are too thin?
- Would you say that food dominates your life?

You need to speak to someone about how you feel. Your doctor will be able to refer to you a clinic that specialises in treating eating disorders. It might help to take a parent or friend with you.

What will happen to me?

It's very hard to say exactly what will happen to you as an individual. Anorexia is a personal thing. The good news is that many people get over anorexia. But it's hard work, and it can take many months or even years. One thing that the research shows is that you are much more likely to recover if you get professional help. Research also shows that:

- About half of all people with anorexia recover. This means they're able to stay at a healthy weight for their age and height
- About two-thirds of people who've had anorexia never stop worrying about food and their weight
- With time and treatment, you can understand and control the thoughts and feelings that go along with anorexia. This might mean you feel less guilty or feel happier with your body
- About 20 in 100 people who have anorexia don't get better
- Each year, about 1 in 100 people who have anorexia die from it.

Where to get more help

You can get support and more information from Beat, the Eating Disorders Association (<http://www.b-eat.co.uk>). The Association can put you in touch with local groups of people with eating disorders. Talking to someone who has a similar problem about how you feel may help you get better.

This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice. If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full Conditions of Use for this content <http://besttreatments.bmj.com/btuk/about/12.html>.

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