

Patient information from BMJ

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Anorexia: how to help if someone you know may have it

Anorexia is a serious medical condition. Seeing someone you know refusing to eat can be upsetting. You may feel helpless and anxious. Getting help for anorexia is important. Treatments can help people with anorexia feel better about themselves so that anorexia does not take over their life.

What is it?

People who have anorexia are very afraid of putting on weight and try hard to avoid gaining weight. They may be very thin and weigh much less than is healthy. They often eat little and skip meals.

Some people with anorexia also make themselves sick (vomit), take laxatives, or spend hours exercising.

Someone with anorexia may not understand why they behave the way they do. They may feel ashamed and guilty about their behaviour and often try to hide it. Anorexia can cause serious damage to the body and even lead to death from starvation.

How can I tell if someone has anorexia?

People who have eating disorders often try hard to keep them secret. Some things that suggest that someone might have anorexia or another eating disorder include:

- eating small portions of food and skipping meals
- avoiding foods rich in calories, such as full fat dairy products and sweet foods
- behaving strangely around food (for example, cutting food into small pieces and moving it around the plate but not eating it)
- not wanting to eat with others
- constantly talking about food
- saying they feel fat when they are thin

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- preparing big meals for family and friends but not eating the food, or eating just a little or only a few low-calorie foods
- being irritable and distressed, especially around mealtimes
- feeling full after eating only a small amount of food
- leaving the table during or immediately after a meal, often to go to the toilet
- lying about food and being very secretive (for example, saying, 'I ate earlier' to avoid a meal)
- exercising more than is normal
- being so thin that the outline of their bones shows through their clothes
- having fine, downy hair on their face
- always feeling cold
- drinking lots of water or fizzy, low-calorie drinks (which take away hunger pangs)
- missing school or work.

If you're a parent, bear in mind that many children and teenagers are picky eaters at times. It isn't necessarily a sign of an eating disorder.

But if your child has a problem with food, remember that they can't help their behaviour. Your child may be scared or embarrassed and will need your support.

Talking to someone about whether they have an eating disorder can be very difficult. They may not want to admit they have a problem or they may say they don't want help. They may get angry.

The most important thing is to encourage your friend or family member to see a doctor. You could offer to go with them if they feel that would help.

But even if your friend or relative isn't ready to see a doctor, you can still be there for them and keep offering your support.

You may also find it useful to talk to someone about your worries. Your doctor may be able to put you in touch with a local support group for people with anorexia and their families. The people there may be able to give you some advice about how to cope with someone who has an eating disorder.

What treatments work?

To get better, someone with anorexia needs to:

- recognise they have a problem
- want to get better
- start to eat more food
- put on weight
- change how they think about themselves and food.

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These things might look simple, but they can be hard to do.

People are more likely to recover from anorexia if they get treatment quickly. Getting support and advice from health care professionals can help people put on weight. They can:

- advise about an eating plan to safely regain weight
- advise about any necessary nutritional supplements, and
- monitor weight and health.

Talking treatments such as psychotherapy or cognitive behaviour therapy may help people with anorexia to change the way they think about themselves and food.

Family therapy, which involves other people in the family as well as the person with anorexia, may also help if a child or teenager has anorexia.

Some people with anorexia need to be treated in hospital. This may be because their body systems have become unstable because their weight is so low, and their life is at risk, or because they have been treated at home before without success. Other people can stay at home and just go to a clinic for treatment.

Treatment with antidepressants or other drugs does not seem likely to help with anorexia. However, people with anorexia may be treated with antidepressants if they also have a condition such as depression.

Where to get more help

If you are worried about someone who may have anorexia, there are charities and support groups that can help. For example, in the UK, you can get more information from Beat, the Eating Disorders Association (beateatingdisorders.org.uk).

Organisations like this one can also put you in touch with local groups of people with eating disorders and their carers. Talking to someone about how they coped with a child, friend, or spouse with anorexia may give you support and help you cope.

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