

# Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Sep 11, 2020

## Anorexia

**Anorexia is a serious medical condition. It can damage your body and put your life in danger. Getting help can be hard but is the most 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 are probably very afraid of putting on weight. You may worry that you are fat, even though you are actually underweight. You spend a lot of time thinking about how to lose weight or avoid putting it on.

The illness makes it hard for you to see that you are underweight. Some people with anorexia feel unhappy and see starving themselves as a way to control how they feel. It is common to think that losing weight will make you feel happier, better about yourself, and more in control.

You may not understand the way you behave. You may feel ashamed and guilty and try to hide it. 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 friends and family.

### What are the symptoms?

If you have anorexia, you know what the symptoms are. They have been part of your life for months or even years. You are underweight and you eat very little, or avoid eating at all. You worry all the time about your weight. You may exercise for hours, take laxatives (drugs that make you go to the bathroom) and make yourself vomit.

Anorexia can affect your health in lots of 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

## Anorexia

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

If you make yourself vomit your teeth may become discoloured.

Having anorexia for a long time can cause 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 eyesight.

### What can I do to help myself?

The best thing you can do is to ask for help. This may be hard, especially if you do not think there is anything wrong. But if you answer "yes" to some of the questions below, you may have an eating disorder and need help.

- Do you make yourself sick to the stomach (vomit) because you feel too full?
- 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?

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

### What treatments work?

To recover from anorexia, you'll need to:

- Realise you have a problem
- Want to get better
- Start to eat more food
- Put on weight
- Change how you think about yourself and food.

This sounds simple but is hard to do. There is not much good research about treatments for anorexia. However, people are more likely to recover from anorexia if they get treatment quickly. Even if you have had anorexia a long time, though, you should get help.

Getting advice and support from professionals can help you put on weight safely. They can help you with an eating plan so you can put on weight, and will monitor your health. You will be given vitamin and mineral supplements if you need them.

# Anorexia

Talking treatments (for example, psychotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy) seem to help many people with anorexia. For children and teenagers, family therapy where other family members are involved, is helpful.

Some people with anorexia need to be treated in hospital. This may be because home treatment has not worked. Others need to be in hospital because they are so ill that their life is at risk. Many people with anorexia can live at home and visit 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.

## What will happen to me?

We can't say what will happen to you personally. Anorexia is a personal thing. The good news is that many people get over anorexia. But it's hard work, and it can take a long time. You are more likely to recover if you get professional help.

From research studies, we know that between 50 in 100 and 75 in 100 people with anorexia were completely better, 10 to 15 years after treatment. Others still had some type of eating disorder and about 19 in 100 still had anorexia.

Each year, about 1 in 100 people with anorexia die from the condition.

## 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.

The patient information from *BMJ Best Practice* from which this leaflet is derived is regularly updated. The most recent version of Best Practice can be found at [bestpractice.bmj.com](http://bestpractice.bmj.com). This information is intended for use by health professionals. It is not a substitute for medical advice. It is strongly recommended that you independently verify any interpretation of this material and, if you have a medical problem, see your doctor.

Please see BMJ's full terms of use at: [bmj.com/company/legal-information](http://bmj.com/company/legal-information). BMJ does not make any representations, conditions, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that this material is accurate, complete, up-to-date or fit for any particular purposes.

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2020. All rights reserved.

