Anorexia Nervosa is a serious, potentially life threatening mental illness.

A person with Anorexia has not made a ‘lifestyle choice’, they are actually very unwell and need help.

The reasons behind the development of Anorexia will differ from person to person; known causes include genetic predisposition and a combination of environmental, social and cultural factors.

For some people, restricting their food and weight can be a way of controlling areas of life that feel out of their control and their body image can come to define their entire sense of self worth. It can also be a way of expressing emotions that may feel too complex or frightening such as pain, stress or anxiety.

Restrictive dieting and excessive exercise can be contributing factors to the onset of Anorexia. Women and girls with Anorexia may use dieting behaviour in a bid to achieve a culturally constructed thin ideal whereas men may over exercise and control their diet to achieve a muscular body.

It is commonly accepted that Anorexia is more frequently diagnosed in females across the ages. However, a recent population study has suggested that in adolescents, there are an equal number of males and females suffering from this illness.

Defining Anorexia:

- **Restricted energy intake**: A person with Anorexia is unable to maintain what is considered to be a normal and healthy weight. They could also have lost a considerable amount of weight in a short period of time.

- **A fear of gaining weight**: Even when people with Anorexia are underweight, starved or malnourished they still possess an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming overweight.

Sub-Types of Anorexia

**Restricting Subtype**
People with this subtype place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they consume. This can manifest in different ways including some or all of the following:

- Restricting certain food groups
- Counting calories
- Skipping meals
- Obsessive rules and rigid thinking

**Binge Eating/Purging Subtype**
People with this subtype also place severe restriction on the amount and type of food they consume. In addition to this the person will display purging behaviour and may also engage in binge eating. Binge eating involves eating a large amount of food and feeling a ‘loss of control’. Purging behaviour involves self induced vomiting, or deliberately misusing laxatives, diuretics or enemas to compensate for eating food.

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What are the warning signs of Anorexia?

Having awareness about Anorexia and its signs and symptoms can make a huge difference to the duration and severity of the illness. Seeking help at the first warning sign is much more effective than waiting until the illness is in full swing. If you or someone you know is exhibiting some or a combination of these signs it is vital to seek help and support as soon as possible.

Someone with Anorexia may display any combination of the following warning signs.

**Physical signs:**
- Rapid weight loss or frequent weight changes
- Loss or disturbance of menstruation in girls and women and decreased libido in men
- Fainting or dizziness
- Feeling cold most of the time, even in warm weather
- Feeling bloated, constipated, or the development of intolerances to food
- Feeling tired and not sleeping well
- Lethargy and low energy
- Facial changes
- Fine hair appearing on face and body

**Psychological signs:**
- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and weight
- Feeling anxious and/or irritable around meal times
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- Unable to maintain a normal body weight for their age and height
- Depression and anxiety
- Reduced capacity for thinking and increased difficulty concentrating

**Behavioural signs:**
- ‘Black and white’ thinking
- Having a distorted body image
- Low self esteem and perfectionism
- Increased sensitivity to comments relating to food, weight, body shape, exercise
- Extreme body image dissatisfaction

**Is recovery from Anorexia possible?**

**Yes.** It is possible to recover from Anorexia, even if you have been living with the illness for many years. The path to recovery can be long and challenging, however with the right team supporting you and a high level of commitment, recovery is achievable. Treatment for Anorexia is available; seek help from a professional with specialised knowledge in eating disorders.

**Getting help**

If you suspect that you or someone you know has Anorexia, it is important to seek help immediately. The earlier you seek help the closer you are to recovery. While your GP may not be a specialist in eating disorders, they are a good ‘first base’ and can refer you to a practitioner with specialised knowledge in health, nutrition and eating disorders.


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