

# Centre for Mental Health

Swinburne University of Technology

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## What is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia nervosa (AN) is a mental health condition characterised by severe body image concerns and an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat. This leads to restricted eating, resulting in a very low body weight. AN has two subtypes: binge-eating and purging subtype that describes people who compensate for episodes of 'bingeing' by vomiting, using laxatives or excessive exercising; and restrictive subtype in which binge-eating and purging behaviours are not present. AN is a very serious illness; 1 in 10 people who develop the condition will die from starvation or suicide. People with AN often have poor quality of life, and other mental health conditions, including depression or anxiety.

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## Prevalence of AN

It is estimated that 1.2-2.2% of females will develop AN over their lifetime. Males also get AN, but less frequently, with approximately 1 in 10 people with AN being male. The onset of AN tends to occur in mid to late adolescence, or early adulthood. Its course varies, with some recovering after a single episode, others alternating between being ill and well, and people who remain ill for a very long time.

## Possible causes

The causes of AN remain unknown. However, psychological, sociocultural and biological factors are thought to contribute to the illness. Psychological risk factors include high perfectionistic traits and obsessive-compulsive behaviours, whereas sociocultural factors include being a white female in an industrialised society. A number of biological risk factors may also play a role, including a person's genes and the way their brain functions.



## Symptoms of AN

Common symptoms include:

- Severe weight loss
- Dieting behaviours
- Loss of menstruation in females
- Preoccupation with eating, food, or body shape and weight
- Distorted body image
- Low self-esteem
- Depression and anxiety
- Perfectionism
- Black-and-white thinking

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## Treatment options

Treatment for AN typically involves family therapy for adolescents, and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) for adults. Sometimes people with AN require hospitalisation to help restore their body weight. Psychological and/or psychiatric treatment is important, and can be administered in an inpatient hospital setting, through a day patient program, as an outpatient, or through private services.