

# The physical effects of anorexia

Anorexia has very serious physical effects and complications, as well as a devastating impact upon psychological well being. There are the immediate physical effects as the body struggles to function without the nutrients and fuel that it needs.

The sufferer is also at risk of developing long term and potentially life-threatening health problems, particularly if the condition is untreated for many years.

## Immediate physical signs of anorexia

Food deprivation has a range of physical effects as the body struggles to cope with insufficient nutrients and calories.

Anorexia sufferers can suffer some or all of the following:

- constipation;
- dizzy spells and faintness;
- abdominal pains;
- muscle weakness;
- poor circulation resulting in feeling constantly;
- cold, dry, yellow coloured skin;
- early morning waking;
- bloating;
- people with anorexia often develop long, fine downy hair on face and body;
- disrupted menstrual cycles or no periods at all.

## Anorexia and osteoporosis

Osteoporosis, or “soft bones” is a disease which results in the density of the bones reducing. This leaves sufferers prone to painful fractures, particularly in the spine and hip, persistent and disabling pain and loss of height.

People with eating disorders are at risk of developing osteoporosis because their bodies are deprived of the vital nutrients bones need in order to grow and remain strong. Calcium is the most important nutrient for the bones.

The risk of osteoporosis is particularly serious for people with eating disorders because dangerous eating patterns commonly develop from the age of 13 and throughout the teens, when the bones are still growing and reaching peak strength.

## Anorexia and fertility

Infertility is a serious and common complication of anorexia. If a woman’s body fat falls dramatically, she will no longer produce the hormone, oestrogen, which is necessary to stimulate ovulation.

Nine out of ten women with anorexia will stop having periods. If the menstrual cycles and ovulation are suppressed for a very long time, this can affect fertility. A recent study found one in five women at an IVF clinic were experiencing problems due to an eating disorder.

The stopping of periods can be permanent, if a sufferer has had untreated anorexia for a long time. But for most women, menstruation will start again once they begin to gain weight. Approximately 80 per cent of women who recover from anorexia will regain their ability to conceive.

If a woman with anorexia does conceive, she faces a high risk of miscarriage and having a low birth weight baby. Any woman who is struggling with an eating disorder should delay pregnancy until she has recovered.

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## Anorexia and heart problems

Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of all forms of mental illness, with rates of between 10 and 15 per cent. A significant proportion of these deaths are due to heart failure as a result of long term, severe anorexia.

When anorexia has become this severe, the heart is often damaged. There not enough body fat to protect the heart, anaemia, which weakens the blood, can develop and there is commonly poor circulation. This means that the heart is not able to pump and circulate blood effectively.

Severe anorexia results in the loss of muscle mass, including heart muscle. Consequently, the muscles of the heart can physically weaken, there can be an overall drop in blood pressure and pulse can contribute to slower breathing rates.

Studies have shown that the majority of people with anorexia who are admitted to hospital have low heart rates. Common heart problems include arrhythmias (fast, slow or irregular heart beat), bradycardia (slow heart beat) and hypotension (low blood pressure).

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## Anorexia and neurological (brain) problems

People with severe anorexia may suffer nerve damage that affects the brain and other parts of the body. This can lead to nerve affected conditions including the development of seizures, confused thinking and extreme irritability and numbness or odd nerve sensations in the hands or feet (peripheral neuropathy).

Brain scans show that parts of the brain can undergo structural changes and abnormal activity during anorexic states. Some of these changes return to normal after weight gain, but there is evidence that some damage may be permanent.

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## Anorexia and anaemia (or blood problems)

Anaemia is a common result of anorexia and starvation. In one study, 38 per cent of anorexic participants had anemia. A particularly serious blood problem is pernicious anaemia, which can be caused by severely low levels of vitamin B12. If anorexia becomes extreme, the bone marrow dramatically reduces its production of blood cells, a life-threatening condition called pancytopenia.

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## Where can I find out more?

Go to [www.newbridge-health.org.uk/information](http://www.newbridge-health.org.uk/information) for more information.

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