

Physical and Psychological Effects of Anorexia Nervosa

As a result of the food restriction and malnutrition that occurs with Anorexia Nervosa, the body is denied the essential nutrients it needs to function normally. This, along with excessive activity/exercise to avoid weight gain, forces the body to slow down its natural processes to conserve what little energy it has, and if left untreated can result in severe medical and mental health problems. In some cases, the condition can be life-threatening.

Physical effects associated with Anorexia Nervosa include:

- Rapid weight loss or frequent fluctuations in weight
- Low iron levels
- Poor blood circulation, irregular or slow heart beat, very low blood pressure, sudden cardiac arrest and even heart failure
- Menstrual loss or disruption in females
- Decreased testosterone in males
- Decreased libido
- Fertility issues
- Poor bone health, increased risk of fractures and breaks
- Muscle loss, weakness and fatigue
- Weak nails, thin hair, dry skin
- Fainting, headaches or dizziness
- Dehydration, kidney failure
- Constipation, diarrhoea, abdominal pain
- Increased sensitivity to coldness, growth of fine hair, 'lanugo', all over the body to keep warm

Psychological effects associated with Anorexia Nervosa include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sleep disturbances
- Impaired concentration, decision making
- Mood swings, irritability
- Preoccupation with food/calories
- Obsessive compulsiveness
- Intense fear weight gain, or 'feeling fat'
- Social withdrawal
- Suicidal ideation and increased risk of suicide

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to health problems as a result of malnutrition, and long-term consequences can occur due to interrupted growth and pubertal development. Below is a list of complications that should be considered when assessing young people with eating problems:

- Significant dehydration
- Significant deficits in bone mass (leading to osteopaenia and osteoporosis)
- Stunted growth
- Limited fat mass stores
- Delayed or incomplete pubertal development
- Psychological complications including depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and cognitive impairment

References:

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