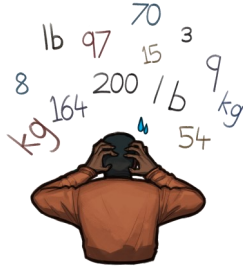


Atypical Anorexia Nervosa

What is Atypical Anorexia Nervosa?

Atypical Anorexia Nervosa (Atypical AN) is a serious and potentially life-threatening illness. Key symptoms include:

- Eating significantly less food than is required to meet daily energy requirements
- Intense fear of weight gain
- Disturbances in body image, or undue influence of weight or shape on a person's self-worth.



Is it different from Anorexia Nervosa (AN)?

People with Atypical AN have all the same symptoms as those with AN, except that despite eating a dangerously low quantity and variety of food, they remain in medium or larger sized bodies. This can be the most distressing aspect of Atypical AN, as the eating disorder is often “hidden in plain sight”.

Research has shown that Atypical AN is just as serious as AN. People with Atypical AN are equally impacted by serious physical complications, and unhelpful thoughts about food, weight and shape, and often require admission to hospital due to the serious medical effects of their illness.

People with Atypical AN experience many symptoms that are a direct result of starvation. The physiological and psychological effects of prolonged dietary restriction are known as Starvation Syndrome, and include physical, emotional, and social changes, as well as changes to thinking, attitudes and behaviours. Starvation Syndrome can occur **at any weight** and is therefore relevant to all eating disorders (See our handout on *Starvation Syndrome* for more information).

Consequences of Atypical AN

Physical health problems: Low heart rate, amenorrhea (loss of periods), gastrointestinal issues, fatigue, and muscle damage, are all problems that occur in equal severity in Atypical AN and AN. In fact, the only health complication of Atypical AN that has been shown to be less severe than AN is the effect on bone mineral density.

Negative thoughts and emotions: People with Atypical AN and AN often hyper-focus on body weight, size, and shape. They may have low self-worth, low self-esteem, and difficulty thinking and concentrating. They also tend to experience irritability, mood swings, and symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Reduced quality of life: There can be a high level of impact on daily life due to physical risks, distress of the disorder or other effects, such as being unable to eat in social situations.

Stigma: People with Atypical AN are at risk of not being taken seriously, being missed or dismissed by health professionals, or even told to diet.

Seeking Help

People with Atypical AN require treatment including physical re nourishment and psychological therapy to aid recovery. It is important to find a health professional who understands the seriousness of Atypical AN and to have regular appointments for medical monitoring with your General Practitioner (GP).

Treatment for Atypical AN will likely involve **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Eating Disorders (CBT-ED)** for adults, or **Family Based Treatment for Anorexia (FBT)** for young people (see our handouts *Orientation to Treatment and Family Based Therapy: Information for Carers, Consumers, and Professionals*).

A key part of treatment involves restoring weight to within a range that's natural for the person's body, to help reverse medical complications. This is important for optimal brain functioning and normal growth and development, especially for young people going through puberty. Adequate nutrition allows our brains to form new neuronal pathways that enable us to learn and develop as people.

Studies have found that putting back the weight you lost and restoring your body's nutrients are the most important factors in preventing a relapse. However, treatment is not just about weight and eating. Many people with Atypical AN hold strong fears that their weight will increase uncontrollably when they eat differently so treatment also focuses on identifying and testing out fears, learning new strategies to manage mood, body acceptance, and finding things they value about themselves that aren't related to their weight or shape.

Benefits of Recovery

Although challenging, and even with some weight gain, a full recovery is completely possible and worth it. Some benefits include:

- Reduced preoccupation with food, weight, and shape
- Increased flexibility with eating and exercise
- Improved mood and reduced anxiety
- Optimal brain functioning to support the ability to change behaviours, thoughts and feelings.
- Reduced risk of relapse and chronic illness
- Improvements in health and well being.



If you or someone close to you has signs of an eating disorder, it is important to see your GP and discuss seeking help as soon as possible.