



National Eating Disorders Association

A review of

“Arcelus, J., Mitchell, A.J., Wales, J., & Nielsen, S. (2011).
Mortality Rates in Patients with Anorexia Nervosa and Other Eating Disorders.
Archives of General Psychiatry, 68(7), 724-731.”

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While it is well known that the mortality rate, or death rate, in anorexia nervosa (AN) is high, it has been less certain whether there is a high mortality rate in bulimia nervosa (BN), or eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS). AN is characterized by dietary restriction and low body weight. BN is characterized by recurrent episodes of binge eating and compensatory behavior(s). Individuals diagnosed with EDNOS display subthreshold diagnostic features but have significant distress and dysfunction, similar to AN and BN.

This study systematically searched for articles pertaining to eating disorder mortality between the years of 1966 and 2010. Of all the studies they found, 36 were deemed appropriate for inclusion in this paper. The authors used a statistical approach (a meta-analysis) that allows them to combine the results of these 36 studies.

This study calculated weighted mortality rates and standardized mortality ratios for eating disorder subtypes. Weighted mortality rates, which depict deaths per 1000 person-years was 5.1 for AN, 1.7 for BN, and 3.3 for EDNOS. Standardized mortality ratios represent a proportional comparison to the number of deaths that would be expected in a standardized population with similar demographics. Standardized mortality ratios were 5.86 for AN, 1.93 for BN, and 1.92 for EDNOS. One in 5 individuals with AN who died had committed suicide.

In sum, the mortality rate among those with an eating disorder is quite high. AN has the highest mortality rate of all the subtypes and late onset of the disorder significantly predicts greater mortality. Furthermore, the mortality rate of AN is much higher than those of other psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, depression, and bipolar disorder. Both BN and EDNOS have notable rates as well. The elevated rate of death among those with an eating disorder is alarming and further emphasizes the severity of these disorders. It is also important to point out that BN and EDNOS, which are commonly thought to be less severe and not as lethal, do have high rates of death and should be treated with the same urgency as AN. The fatality of these disorders highlights the importance of developing more effective treatments and providing patients with sufficient clinical care.