

GENETICS

Genetics of anorexia nervosa

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Credit: Francesco Carta fotografo / Moment / Getty

Anorexia nervosa affects between 1% and 4% of women and 0.3% of men.

The disorder is heritable and is frequently lethal. However, it is poorly understood, and existing therapies have notoriously poor outcomes.

In a new genome-wide association study, Hunna J. Watson of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and colleagues build on earlier work that revealed significant genetic correlations between anorexia nervosa and psychiatric as well as metabolic phenotypes. In this new study, the authors quadrupled their sample size, which allowed them to more fully characterize the metabolic contribution to anorexia nervosa. They identified eight significant risk loci, finding significant genetic correlations between anorexia and psychiatric disorders, physical activity, and metabolic and anthropometric traits. The metabolic-related genetic correlations were found to be independent of the effects of common variants associated with body-mass index.

These findings support a reconceptualization of anorexia nervosa as a metabo-psychiatric disorder, rather than as a purely psychiatric or psychological one. Further research to elucidate the metabolic components of the disorder may lead to more successful future therapies.

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