

# Religiosity does not increase the risk of anorexia nervosa

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Religiosity has been associated with various forms of fasting and self-starvation for thousands of years. Many believe that extreme religiosity can be a risk factor of anorexia nervosa. However, a recent population study conducted in Finland showed that religiosity does not increase the risk of anorexia nervosa.

"Many medieval saints fasted themselves to death. The most famous of them was St Catherine of Siena," says Associate Professor Anna Keski-Rahkonen from the University of Helsinki, Finland, who led the recent study. "But nobody has looked into this issue in any systematic way. We wanted to examine whether [religiosity](#) is associated with a higher risk of anorexia nervosa in modern women."

This is the first study to examine the potential connection between religiosity and anorexia nervosa in a nationwide setting. Researchers at the University of Helsinki followed almost 3000 women from the Finnish Twin Cohorts from the age 16 until their mid-twenties.

"We found that religiosity does not appear to be a central factor in the development of anorexia nervosa in Finland, a highly secularized Christian country," said Dr Pyry Sipilä who analyzed the data and authored the article. "Being raised in a highly religious family is also not associated with an increased [risk](#) of [anorexia](#) nervosa."

"However, it is important to note that extreme religiosity is quite rare in Finland and many Protestants don't observe Lent. Ideally, this study

should be repeated in a country where fasting during religious festivals is very common."

Nevertheless, Dr Sipilä has some further good news: "There is a possibility that religiosity might have a small positive effect on body image."

The paper was published in *International Journal of Eating Disorders*.

**More information:** Pyry Sipilä et al. "Holy anorexia"-relevant or relic? Religiosity and anorexia nervosa among Finnish women, *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/eat.22698](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22698)

Provided by University of Helsinki

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