

Bulimia Nervosa

What is bulimia?

Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder. If you have bulimia nervosa, you eat larger amounts of food than most people would eat in a short time (binge), then you purge by making yourself vomit or using laxatives. Purging is meant to make up for bingeing.

Most bulimics have a normal weight, but you feel you lack control over your eating behavior. You often feel that your life is controlled by conflicts about eating.

Although the disorder can affect men, most people with bulimia nervosa are young women.

How does it occur?

The exact cause of bulimia nervosa is not known. Some researchers believe that eating disorders may be related to problems with the chemicals in the brain that regulate mood and appetite.

If you have bulimia nervosa you may:

- ▶ have a family history of bulimia nervosa or eating disorders
- ▶ have a family or personal history of mood disorders, such as major depression or bipolar disorder (manic depression).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of bulimia include:

- ▶ repeated binge eating
- ▶ strict dieting or fasting
- ▶ repeated weight loss and gain of more than 10 pounds
- ▶ dehydration
- ▶ weakness
- ▶ depression and guilt after binge eating
- ▶ heartburn or reflux from stomach acid injuring the esophagus
- ▶ damaged teeth from stomach acid contained in vomit
- ▶ swollen cheeks from repeated vomiting
- ▶ constant thoughts about being thin

- ▶ depressed or anxious mood
- ▶ too much exercise
- ▶ scratches or scars on the back of fingers or hands from self-induced vomiting
- ▶ menstrual problems.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider takes a medical history and does a physical exam. He or she will ask about your eating patterns, looking for such behavior as:

- ▶ repeated episodes of binge eating followed by purging
- ▶ alternate bingeing and fasting
- ▶ secret eating and bingeing
- ▶ exercising excessively to prevent weight gain.

How is it treated?

If you have bulimia, you must recognize that you are suffering from a dangerous disorder. Treatment involves getting your eating habits back to normal. Your health care provider may recommend psychotherapy or family counseling. Psychotherapy, either individual or group therapy, is very important. You may also need medicine used for mood disorders, such as antidepressants or mood stabilizers.

How long will the effects last?

The risk of relapse exists for years after treatment ends. Without treatment, you may become depressed and suicidal.

How can I take care of myself?

- ▶ Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals. Schedule meals regularly, but not too rigidly.
- ▶ Avoid irregular eating habits and avoid fasting.
- ▶ Take vitamin and mineral supplements, if recommended by your health care provider.
- ▶ Avoid using laxatives and diuretics. These can have serious side effects if taken inappropriately.

- ▶ Seek professional help if you need to lose weight so you can lose weight slowly and to a healthy level.
- ▶ Exercise regularly and in moderation.

What can be done to help prevent bulimia?

Many bulimics do not feel good about themselves. You can raise your self-esteem and thus prevent or minimize bulimia if you:

- ▶ Try to resolve areas of conflict in your life.
- ▶ Try to achieve a balance of work, social activities, recreation, rest, and exercise in your life.

- ▶ Create a support group of good friends.
- ▶ Keep a positive outlook on life.
- ▶ Stop judging yourself and others.

You may want to contact:

- ▶ The National Mental Health Association (NMHA). NMHA's toll-free number is 1-800-969-NMHA. The Web site is <http://www.NMHA.org>.
- ▶ Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, Inc. (EDAP). Their toll-free number is: 1800-931-2237. The Web site is <http://www.nationaleating-disorders.org>