

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia nervosa, often called bulimia, is a type of eating disorder. People with bulimia eat large amounts of food at one time and then try to get rid of the food or weight gain. Bulimia affects more girls and women than boys and men. Bulimia is a serious health problem, but people with bulimia can get better with treatment.

Q: What is bulimia?

A: Women with bulimia eat a lot of food in a short amount of time and feel a lack of control over eating during this time (called bingeing). People with bulimia then try to prevent weight gain by getting rid of the food (called purging). Purging may be done by:

- Making yourself throw up
- Taking laxatives. Laxatives can include pills or liquids that speed up the movement of food through your body and lead to bowel movements.

Women with bulimia may also try to prevent weight gain after bingeing by exercising a lot more than normal, eating very little or not at all (fasting), or taking pills to urinate often.

Q: Who is at risk for bulimia?

A: Bulimia happens to women of all races and ethnicities.

Teen girls between 15 and 19 and young women in their early 20s are most at risk. But eating disorders are happening more often in older women.

Q: What are the symptoms of bulimia?

A: Symptoms of bulimia may include:

- Swollen cheeks or jaw area
- Calluses or scrapes on the knuckles (if using fingers to induce vomiting)
- Teeth that look clear instead of white and are increasingly sensitive and decaying
- Broken blood vessels in the eyes
- Acid reflux, constipation, and other gastrointestinal problems
- Severe dehydration

Girls or women with bulimia may also have behavior changes such as:

- Often going to the bathroom right after eating (to throw up)
- Exercising a lot, even in bad weather or when hurt or tired
- Acting moody or sad, hating the way she looks, or feeling hopeless
- Having problems expressing anger
- Not wanting to go out with friends or do activities she once enjoyed

People with bulimia often have other mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, or substance abuse.

Q: How does bulimia affect a woman's health?

A: Purging through vomiting or taking laxatives can prevent your body from getting the important nutrients it needs from food. Over time, bulimia can affect your body in the following ways:

- Stomach damage from overeating
- Electrolyte imbalance (having levels of sodium, potassium, or other minerals that are too high or too low, which can lead to heart attack or heart failure)
- Ulcers and other damage to your throat from vomiting
- Irregular periods or not having periods, which can cause problems getting pregnant
- Tooth decay from vomiting
- Dehydration

- Problems having bowel movements or damage to the intestines from laxative abuse

Q: How is bulimia diagnosed?

A: Your doctor or nurse will ask you questions about your symptoms and medical history. It may be difficult to talk to a doctor or nurse about secret eating, purging, or exercise behaviors. Being honest about your eating behaviors is a good way to ask for help.

Q: How is bulimia treated?

A: Your doctor may refer you to a team of doctors, nutritionists, and therapists who will work to help you get better. Treatment plans may include nutrition therapy, psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”), support groups, or medicine like antidepressants.

For more information...

on bulimia, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

MentalHealth.gov, HHS
MentalHealth.gov

National Institute of Mental Health, NIH, HHS
866-615-6464 • www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders/index.shtml

American Psychological Association
800-374-2721 • www.apa.org

National Eating Disorders Association
800-931-2237 • www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

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