

Bulimia Nervosa

Signs, Symptoms, Treatment, and Help

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We've all been there: turning to food when feeling lonely, bored, or stressed. But with bulimia, overeating is more like a compulsion. And instead of eating sensibly to make up for it, you punish yourself by purging, fasting, or exercising to get rid of the calories. This vicious cycle of bingeing and purging

takes a toll on your body and emotional well-being. But the cycle can be broken. Treatment can help you develop a healthier relationship with food and overcome feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame.

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What is bulimia?

Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder characterized by frequent episodes of binge eating, followed by frantic efforts to avoid gaining weight. It affects women and men of all ages.

When you're struggling with bulimia, life is a constant battle between the desire to lose weight or stay thin and the overwhelming compulsion to binge eat.

You don't want to binge—you know you'll feel guilty and ashamed afterwards—but time and again you give in. During an average binge, you may consume from 3,000 to 5,000 calories in one short hour.

After it ends, panic sets in and you turn to drastic measures to "undo" the binge, such as taking ex-lax, inducing vomiting, or going for a ten-mile run. And all the while, you feel increasingly out of control.

It's important to note that bulimia doesn't necessarily involve purging—physically eliminating the food from your body by throwing up or using laxatives, enemas, or diuretics. If you make up for your binges by fasting, exercising to excess, or going on crash diets, this also qualifies as bulimia.

Am I Bulimic?

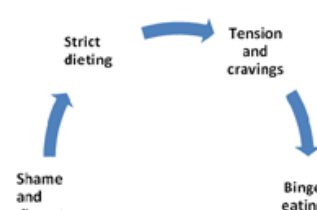
Ask yourself the following questions. The more "yes" answers, the more likely you are suffering from bulimia or another eating disorder.

- Are you obsessed with your body and your weight?
- Does food and dieting dominate your life?
- Are you afraid that when you start eating, you won't be able to stop?
- Do you ever eat until you feel sick?
- Do you feel guilty, ashamed, or depressed after you eat?
- Do you vomit or take laxatives to control your weight?

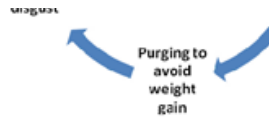
The binge and purge cycle

Dieting triggers bulimia's destructive cycle of bingeing and purging. The irony is that the more strict and rigid the diet, the more likely it is that you'll become preoccupied, even obsessed, with food. When you starve yourself, your body responds with powerful cravings—its way of asking for needed nutrition.

As the tension, hunger, and feelings of deprivation build, the



compulsion to eat becomes too powerful to resist: a “forbidden” food is eaten; a dietary rule is broken. With an all-or-nothing mindset, you feel any diet slip-up is a total failure. After having a bite of ice cream, you might think, “I’ve already blown It, so I might as well go all out.”



Unfortunately, the relief that bingeing brings is extremely short-lived. Soon after, guilt and self-loathing set in. And so you purge to make up for bingeing and regain control.

Unfortunately, purging only reinforces binge eating. Though you may tell yourself, as you launch into a new diet, that this is the last time, in the back of your mind there’s a voice telling you that you can always throw up or use laxatives if you lose control again. What you may not realize is that purging doesn’t come close to wiping the slate clean after a binge.

Purging does NOT prevent weight gain

Purging isn’t effective at getting rid of calories, which is why most people suffering with bulimia end up gaining weight over time. Vomiting immediately after eating will only eliminate 50% of the calories consumed at best—and usually much less. This is because calorie absorption begins the moment you put food in the mouth. Laxatives and diuretics are even less effective. Laxatives get rid of only 10% of the calories eaten, and diuretics do nothing at all. You may weigh less after taking them, but that lower number on the scale is due to water loss, not true weight loss.

Signs and symptoms of bulimia

If you’ve been living with bulimia for a while, you’ve probably “done it all” to conceal your bingeing and purging habits. It’s only human to feel ashamed about having a hard time controlling yourself with food, so you most likely binge alone. If you eat a box of doughnuts, then you’ll replace them so your friends or family won’t notice. When buying food for a binge, you might shop at four separate markets so the checker won’t guess. But despite your secret life, those closest to you probably have a sense that something is not right.

Binge eating signs and symptoms

- **Lack of control over eating** – Inability to stop eating. Eating until the point of physical discomfort and pain.
- **Secrecy surrounding eating** – Going to the kitchen after everyone else has gone to bed. Going out alone on unexpected food runs. Wanting to eat in privacy.
- **Eating unusually large amounts of food** with no obvious change in weight.
- **Disappearance of food**, numerous empty wrappers or food containers in the garbage, or hidden stashes of junk food.
- **Alternating between overeating and fasting** – Rarely eats normal meals. It’s all-or-nothing when it comes to food.

Purging signs and symptoms

- **Going to the bathroom after meals** – Frequently disappears after meals or takes a trip to the bathroom to throw up. May run the water to disguise sounds of vomiting.
- **Using laxatives, diuretics, or enemas** after eating. May also take diet pills to curb appetite or use the sauna to “sweat out” water weight.
- **Smell of vomit** – The bathroom or the person may smell like vomit. They may try to cover up the smell with mouthwash, perfume, air freshener, gum, or mints.
- **Excessive exercising** – Works out strenuously, especially after eating. Typical activities include high-intensity calorie burners such as running or aerobics.

Physical signs and symptoms of bulimia

- **Calluses or scars on the knuckles or hands** from sticking fingers down the throat to induce vomiting.
- **Puffy “chipmunk” cheeks** caused by repeated vomiting.
- **Discolored teeth** from exposure to stomach acid when throwing up. May look yellow, ragged, or clear.
- **Not underweight** – Men and women with bulimia are usually normal weight or slightly

overweight. Being underweight while purging might indicate a purging type of anorexia.

- **Frequent fluctuations in weight** – Weight may fluctuate by 10 pounds or more due to alternating episodes of bingeing and purging.

Amy's Story

Once again, Amy is on a liquid diet. "I'm going to stick with it," she tells herself. "I won't give in to the cravings this time." But as the day goes on, Amy's willpower weakens. All she can think about is food. Finally, she decides to give in to the urge to binge. She can't control herself any longer. She grabs a pint of ice cream out of the freezer, inhaling it within a matter of minutes. Then it's on to anything else she can find in the kitchen. After 45 minutes of bingeing, Amy is so stuffed that her stomach feels like it's going to burst. She's disgusted with herself and terrified by the thousands of calories she's consumed. She runs to the bathroom to throw up. Afterwards, she steps on the scale to make sure she hasn't gained any weight. She vows to start her diet again tomorrow. Tomorrow, it will be different.

Effects of bulimia

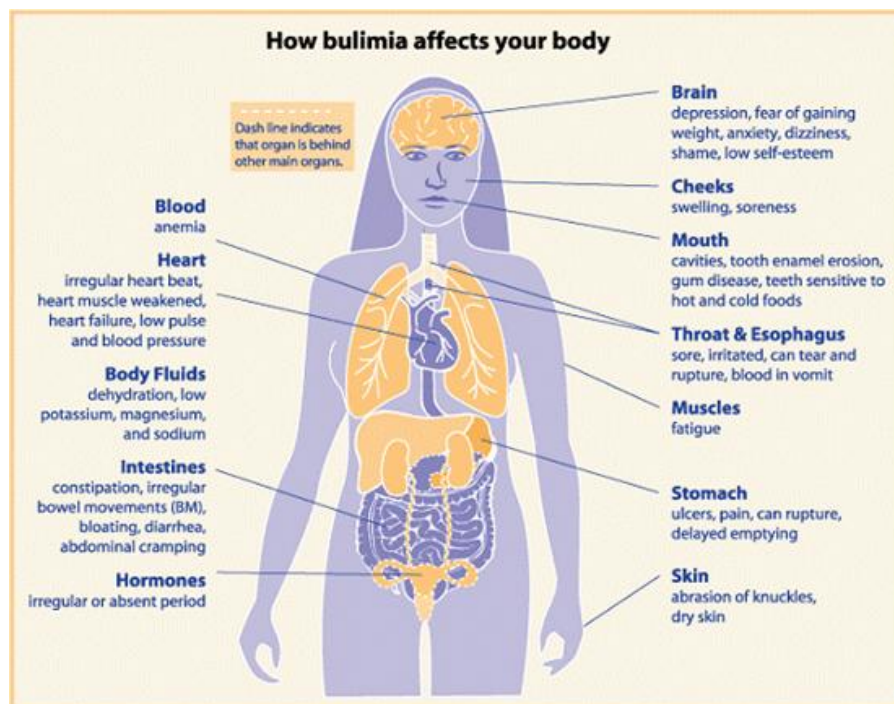
When you are living with bulimia, you are putting your body—and even your life—at risk. The most dangerous side effect of bulimia is dehydration due to purging. Vomiting, laxatives, and diuretics can cause electrolyte imbalances in the body, most commonly in the form of low potassium levels. Low potassium levels trigger a wide range of symptoms ranging from lethargy and cloudy thinking to irregular heartbeat and death. Chronically low levels of potassium can also result in kidney failure.

Other common medical complications and adverse effects of bulimia include:

- Weight gain
- Abdominal pain, bloating
- Swelling of the hands and feet
- Chronic sore throat, hoarseness
- Broken blood vessels in the eyes
- Swollen cheeks and salivary glands
- Weakness and dizziness
- Tooth decay and mouth sores
- Acid reflux or ulcers
- Ruptured stomach or esophagus
- Loss of menstrual periods
- Chronic constipation from laxative abuse

The dangers of ipecac syrup

If you use ipecac syrup, a medicine used to induce vomiting, after a binge, take caution. Regular use of ipecac syrup can be deadly. Ipecac builds up in the body over time. Eventually it can lead to heart damage and sudden cardiac arrest, as it did in the case of singer Karen Carpenter.



Source: *National Women's Health Information Center*

Bulimia causes and risk factors

There is no single cause of bulimia. While low self-esteem and concerns about weight and body image play major roles, there are many other contributing causes. In most cases, people suffering with bulimia—and eating disorders in general—have trouble managing emotions in a healthy way. Eating can be an emotional release so it's not surprising that people binge and purge when feeling angry, depressed, stressed, or anxious.

One thing is certain. Bulimia is a complex emotional issue. Major causes and risk factors for bulimia include:

- **Poor body image:** Our culture's emphasis on thinness and beauty can lead to body dissatisfaction, particularly in young women bombarded with media images of an unrealistic physical ideal.
- **Low self-esteem:** Women or men who think of themselves as useless, worthless, and unattractive are at risk for bulimia. Things that can contribute to low self-esteem include depression, perfectionism, childhood abuse, and a critical home environment.
- **History of trauma or abuse:** Women with bulimia appear to have a higher incidence of sexual abuse. People with bulimia are also more likely than average to have parents with a substance abuse problem or psychological disorder.
- **Major life changes:** Bulimia is often triggered by stressful changes or transitions, such as the physical changes of puberty, going away to college, or the breakup of a relationship. Binging and purging may be a negative way to cope with the stress.
- **Appearance-oriented professions or activities:** People who face tremendous image pressure are vulnerable to developing bulimia. Those at risk include ballet dancers, models, gymnasts, wrestlers, runners, and actors.

Getting help for bulimia

If you are living with bulimia, you know how scary it feels to be so out of control. Knowing that you are harming your body just adds to the fear. But take heart: change *is* possible. Regardless of how long you've struggled with bulimia, you can learn to break the binge and purge cycle and develop a healthier attitude toward food and your body.

Taking steps toward recovery is tough. It's common to feel ambivalent about giving up your binging and purging, even though it's harmful. If you are even thinking of getting help for bulimia, you are taking a big step forward.

If you or a loved one has bulimia...

Call the National Eating Disorders Association's toll-free hotline at 1-800-931-2237 for free referrals, information, and advice.

Steps to bulimia recovery

- **Admit you have a problem.** Up until now, you've been invested in the idea that life will be better—that you'll finally feel good—if you lose more weight and control what you eat. The first step in bulimia recovery is admitting that your relationship to food is distorted and out of control.
- **Talk to someone.** It can be hard to talk about what you're going through, especially if you've kept your bulimia a secret for a long time. You may be ashamed, ambivalent, or afraid of what others will think. But it's important to understand that you're not alone. Find a good listener—someone who will support you as you try to get better.
- **Stay away from people, places, and activities that trigger the temptation to binge or purge.** You may need to avoid looking at fashion or fitness magazines, spend less time with friends who constantly diet and talk about losing weight, and stay away from weight loss web sites and "pro-mia" sites that promote bulimia. You may also need to be careful when it comes to meal planning and cooking magazines and shows.
- **Seek professional help.** The advice and support of trained eating disorder professionals can help you regain your health, learn to eat normally again, and develop healthier attitudes about food and your body.

The importance of deciding not to diet

Treatment for bulimia is much more likely to succeed when you stop dieting. Once you stop trying to restrict calories and follow strict dietary rules, you will no longer be overwhelmed with cravings and thoughts of foods. By eating normally, you can break the binge-and-purge cycle and still reach a healthy, attractive weight.

Bulimia treatment and therapy

To stop the cycle of bingeing and purging, it's important to seek professional help early, follow through with treatment, and resolve the underlying emotional issues that caused the bulimia in the first place.

Therapy for bulimia

Because poor body image and low self-esteem lie at the heart of bulimia, therapy is an important part of recovery. It's common to feel isolated and shamed by your bingeing and purging, and therapists can help with these feelings.

The treatment of choice for bulimia is cognitive-behavioral therapy. Cognitive-behavioral therapy targets the unhealthy eating behaviors of bulimia and the unrealistic, negative thoughts that fuel them. Here's what to expect in bulimia therapy:

- **Breaking the binge-and-purge cycle** – The first phase of bulimia treatment focuses on stopping the vicious cycle of bingeing and purging and restoring normal eating patterns. You learn to monitor your eating habits, avoid situations that trigger binges, cope with stress in ways that don't involve food, eat regularly to reduce food cravings, and fight the urge to purge.
- **Changing unhealthy thoughts and patterns** – The second phase of bulimia treatment focuses on identifying and changing dysfunctional beliefs about weight, dieting, and body shape. You explore attitudes about eating, and rethink the idea that self-worth is based on weight.
- **Solving emotional issues** – The final phase of bulimia treatment involves targeting emotional issues that caused the eating disorder in the first place. Therapy may focus on relationship issues, underlying anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Overcoming bulimia

It may seem like there's no escape from your eating disorder, but recovery is within your reach. With treatment, support from others, and smart self-help strategies, you can overcome bulimia and gain true self-confidence. Read: [Eating Disorder Treatment & Recovery](#).



Helping a person with bulimia

If you suspect that your friend or family member has bulimia, talk to the person about your concerns. Your loved one may deny bingeing and purging, but there's a chance that he or she will welcome the opportunity to open up about the struggle. Either way, bulimia should never be ignored. The person's physical and emotional health is at stake.

It's painful to know your child or someone you love may be bingeing and purging. You can't force a person with an eating disorder to change and you can't do the work of recovery for your loved one. But [you can help](#) by offering your compassion, encouragement, and support throughout the treatment process.

If your loved one has bulimia

- **Offer compassion and support.** Keep in mind that the person may get defensive or angry. But if he or she does open up, listen without judgment and make sure the person knows you care.
- **Avoid insults, scare tactics, guilt trips, and patronizing comments.** Since bulimia is often caused and exacerbated by stress, low self-esteem, and shame, negativity will only make it worse.
- **Set a good example** for healthy eating, exercising, and body image. Don't make negative comments about your own body or anyone else's.
- **Accept your limits.** As a parent or friend, there isn't a lot you can do to "fix" your loved one's bulimia. The person with bulimia must make the decision to move forward.
- **Take care of yourself.** Know when to seek advice for yourself from a counselor or health professional. Dealing with an eating disorder is stressful, and it will help if you have your own

support system in place.

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Resources & References

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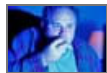
Eating Disorder Treatment & Recovery – With treatment, support from others, and smart self-help strategies, you can overcome your eating disorder and gain true self-confidence.



Helping Someone with an Eating Disorder – You can't force a person with an eating disorder to change, but your encouragement and support can make a positive difference.



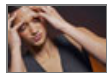
Anorexia Nervosa – Learn to recognize the signs of anorexia, identify the need it's filling in your life, and find healthier ways to feel in control and cope with negative emotions.



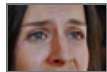
Binge Eating Disorder – It may feel like your compulsive overeating is uncontrollable, but you can learn to break free of the binge eating cycle and get back in control of your eating habits.



Depression Symptoms & Warning Signs – Depression commonly goes hand-in-hand with eating disorders. Learn about the signs and symptoms and what you can do to feel better.



Cutting & Self-Harm – Many people with eating disorders also cut or hurt themselves in order to cope with emotional pain. Learn more about self-injury and how to stop.



Healing Emotional & Psychological Trauma – When bad things happen, it can take time to get over the pain and feel safe again. But no matter how long it's been, you *can* heal and move on.

Emotional Self-Help Toolkit



Many people suffering from eating disorders need to find better ways to manage stress and balance their emotions. Building emotional skills can give you the ability to cope with adversity, heal past traumas, and feel more in control of your life. Helpguide's free **Bring Your Life Into Balance** Emotional Self-Help toolkit can teach you how to confidently

deal with life's problems and get off the emotional rollercoaster.

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A. and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: July 2013.

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