

# Bulimia

## Overview

Understanding bulimia, an eating disorder that involves using drastic measures for controlling weight.

- Signs of bulimia
- Causes of bulimia
- Treatment
- Helping someone with bulimia
- Resources

As many as 4 percent of all Americans may have the eating disorder called bulimia, also known as bulimia nervosa. The symptoms of this condition are less obvious than those of anorexia nervosa, but the disease is actually more common. Like anorexia, bulimia can occur in people of any age and both sexes, but it typically affects girls and women in their teens and twenties.

People with bulimia eat large amounts of food in a short time and try to control their weight through extreme methods such as self-induced vomiting and abusing enemas or laxatives. Unlike people with anorexia, people with bulimia usually fall within a normal weight range. But because they use drastic methods to control their weight, they can suffer serious health problems if they do not receive treatment.

## Signs of bulimia

The signs of bulimia can be hard to recognize because people with the condition usually have a normal or slightly above normal weight for their height and age. Some of the most common symptoms include:

- *Frequent binge-eating* episodes (at least twice a week) or consuming much larger amounts of food than most people would eat during the same time or under similar circumstances
- *Lack of control during binge-eating episodes*, or an inability to stop eating
- *Vomiting after bingeing* (which typically involves trips to the bathroom very soon after eating)
- *Eating in secret, or buying and hiding food for a binge*
- *Abusing laxatives, enemas, diuretics, or diet pills*
- *Exercising compulsively to control weight* -- for example, exercising for several hours a day or more
- *Frequent dieting or fasting* -- going for more than 24 hours without food -- to control weight
- *An unrealistic or distorted body image*, or placing an excessive importance on that image

## 2 • Bulimia

Many people occasionally eat too much or go on a “binge,” so doctors define bulimia as the persistence of such signs for at least three months. If symptoms of anorexia nervosa are present, the person may be diagnosed as having the bulimic form of anorexia. If symptoms of anorexia don't exist, the person will be diagnosed with bulimia.

Like anorexia, bulimia can cause a wide range of physical or mental health problems related to continuous vomiting or the use of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas. These include:

- sore or swollen salivary glands
- broken blood vessels in the eye
- erosion of tooth enamel and an increase in dental cavities
- ulcers or ruptures of the esophagus
- bowel problems from the continual use of laxatives or enemas

### **Causes of bulimia**

The causes of bulimia are not entirely clear, but they are almost always related to psychological factors. People may develop bulimia as a result of abuse, low self-esteem, depression, or any number of psychological reasons. The disease may also be accompanied by or follow periods of depression. People with bulimia may be unusually sensitive to messages from friends or relatives who attach an excessive importance to being thin. They may also be heavily influenced by media images that suggest that they can be loved or happy only if they are extremely slender.

### **Treatment**

People with bulimia tend to have a variety of symptoms, so treatment usually involves several forms of therapy. If you or someone close to you may have the condition, the first step is to get a physical exam to rule out other possible causes of the problem. Because bulimia can result in the erosion of tooth enamel, it's also important to have a dentist check for signs of problems with the mouth and teeth.

People with severe bulimia may require hospitalization. In some cases, bulimics may be seriously dehydrated and need immediate treatment to avoid other dangerous physical complications.

Whether the problem is mild or severe, the most effective treatment often involves a team approach that includes a physician, a therapist, and a dietician or another nutritional counselor. The overall plan may include individual counseling, group or family therapy, nutritional counseling, peer-support programs, and medication to help with depression or anxiety. Some hospitals

have eating disorders clinics that provide a range of treatment programs on an outpatient basis.

### **Helping someone with bulimia**

People with bulimia almost always need help in overcoming their condition. If you see warning signs of the disease in a friend or family member, it's important to insist that the person see a doctor and dentist. They will also need other kinds of support. Here are some ways you can help.

- *Remember that people with bulimia may have a normal body weight* but perception of their body image may be severely distorted.
- *Express your concerns.* Talk about what you've noticed and try to avoid criticizing. ("How can you eat a whole cake? That's disgusting!") Instead, ask gentle questions about how they are feeling in general.
- *Be prepared for someone to deny the problem.* Bulimics may go to great lengths to hide or deny their condition. Plan for how you will respond if the person insists there's "no problem." For example, you might ask a pediatrician or another doctor to talk to your family member or friend about your concern.
- *Find out about treatment programs for bulimia in your area.* Call the psychiatry department of a hospital, a mental health association, or a crisis hotline to find out about treatment programs in your community. This will let you suggest a variety of options that may be appropriate.
- *Try to avoid adding to feelings of guilt and shame.* Many bulimics feel ashamed or guilty about habits like eating in secret or throwing up two or more times a day. Try to avoid adding to the problem by making harsh judgments about how someone should or shouldn't act. Instead, show that you love and care for the person and want to help.

### **Resources**

Many organizations and Web sites can help you find support and stay up-to-date on treatment methods for bulimia. Good resources include:

#### **National Eating Disorders Association**

206-382-3587 or 800-931-2237

[www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

#### **Academy for Eating Disorders**

703-566-9222

[www.aedweb.org](http://www.aedweb.org)

**National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders**

847-831-3438

*www.anad.org*

© 2002 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.