



“Many people who have bulimia nervosa never get treatment. But bulimia rarely goes away by itself.”

What is bulimia nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa is an illness that causes a person to binge on food and purge afterward. Binging is eating a lot of food in a short time, usually less than two hours. During a binge, the person feels that their eating is out of control. Often, they feel guilty, anxious, and/or depressed. People with bulimia get rid of the food by purging because they fear that it will make them gain weight. Some people force themselves to throw up, some use stool softeners, enemas, and diuretics; others may not eat at all or may exercise too much to burn the calories they've eaten. A cycle develops. People with bulimia may binge and purge from occasionally to several times a day. Many people with bulimia may not talk about how much they eat and may stay away from friends and family in order to hide their eating habits.

Who suffers from bulimia nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa affects 1 to 3 percent of people. It affects people from all

ethnic and cultural groups. Most people with bulimia are young women, but bulimia can also be a problem for older women, girls, men, and boys. About 5 to 10 percent of people with bulimia are male.

What causes bulimia nervosa?

We do not know why people get bulimia, but many things can contribute to it. These things can include cultural, family and peer pressures, chemical changes in the body, genes, and emotional problems. Images of “ideal bodies” in the media can lead people to think that they have to be the same shape and weight as the models pictured. It is often unrealistic and hard to look like those images. People who do gymnastics, ballet, wrestling, or other sports that value low body weight may be at increased risk. Negative emotions or events like abuse or the death of a loved one can trigger bulimia. Even happy events, like giving birth or going to college, can also trigger bulimia. People with bulimia often have low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, and are not happy with the way they look. They often have a negative body image and may see themselves as bigger than they actually are even if they have a normal body weight.

Is it important to seek treatment for bulimia nervosa?

Many people with bulimia never get treatment, but bulimia rarely goes away by itself. If left untreated, the disorder can lead to health

problems. People with bulimia often have higher rates of depression and anxiety. They are also at higher risk of substance abuse, including alcohol, street drugs, laxatives, diet pills, diuretics, and drugs that cause vomiting. In severe cases, the disorder can cause serious stomach or throat problems and can lead to heart problems. Binging and purging can also cause water retention, swelling, bloating, loss of important minerals, heartburn, indigestion, and sore throat. The acid in vomit can cause tooth erosion, cavities, and gum problems. Women and girls with bulimia may also have irregular menstrual periods.

Does treatment really work?

Most cases of bulimia can be treated by a health care provider with experience in treating eating disorders. In some cases a team may be involved in treatment, including dietitians and case managers. While a medical visit is recommended, most treatments for bulimia do not require a hospital stay. But treatments do not work instantly. They can be difficult and need hard work from the patient and the family.

Treatment may include therapy and medications (like certain antidepressants). Cognitive-behavioral therapy has been shown to improve self-control and decrease the behaviors that lead to bingeing. In addition, Dialectical Behavioral Therapy is increasingly being utilized in the treatment of bulimia.

Family or couples therapy may be a part of the treatment plan. Therapists can help family members understand bulimia and learn new techniques for coping with the kinds of stress that can trigger it. The sooner treatment starts the better. As with most problems, the treatment is most successful if the condition is recognized early.

What can you do if you have bulimia nervosa?

Recognizing that you have a problem is the first step to getting better.

- Get professional help. Talk with your personal physician, behavioral medicine specialist, or psychiatry department.
- Set realistic goals. Remember to be proud of every success no matter how small.
- Be patient. Setbacks are part of recovery.
- Don't let the scale run your life. The numbers on the scale don't reflect your self-worth.

Ways you can help an adult with bulimia nervosa

- Educate yourself about bulimia nervosa.
- Let them know you care and you want to help.
- Don't pressure them about eating or talk about weight or food.
- Encourage them to get professional help.
- Be patient. Getting better is not just a matter of will power.

- Be prepared. They may deny the problem, get angry, or refuse help.
- Remember that you can only do so much. Your comments may help them get treatment in the future.

What can you do if you suspect your child has bulimia?

- Call your child's pediatrician and make an appointment immediately.
- Call the Department of Child Psychiatry and request an evaluation for an eating disorder.

When to call Kaiser Permanente

Call your doctor if you recognize any of these warning signs of bulimia nervosa:

- using body weight as a primary measure of self-worth
- having an extreme dissatisfaction with body image
- exercising too much
- withdrawing from family and friends
- experiencing periods of uncontrolled eating
- purposely causing yourself to vomit or using laxatives frequently.

Recommended Reading for Adults

The Overcoming Bulimia Workbook, R. McCabe, T. McFarlane, and M. Olmsted (2003)

Life Without Ed, J. Schaefer with T. Rutledge 2004

Bulimia: A Guide to Recovery, L. Hall and L. Cohn, Gurze

Designs and Books, 1999. ISBN: 093607731X. (also available in Spanish, 2001)

Recommended Reading for Parents

Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends, M. Siegel and J. Brisman, Harper-Collins, 2009. ISBN: 0060952334.

The Parent's Guide to Eating Disorders, M. Herrin and N. Matsumoto, 2007

"I'm, Like, So Fat!", *Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices about Eating and Exercise in a Weight-Obsessed World*, D. Neumark-Sztainer, 2005

Recommended Websites

American Anorexia/Bulimia Association (AABA)

www.aabainc.org

Something Fishy

www.something-fishy.org

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- If you are hit, hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.