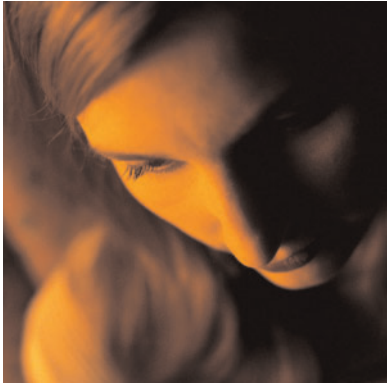


Bulimia Nervosa



Many people who suffer from bulimia nervosa never seek treatment. However, bulimia rarely goes away by itself.

What is bulimia nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa is a psychological condition characterized by a cycle of bingeing and purging. A binge is defined as eating a large amount of food in a short period of time, generally less than two hours. During a binge, people feel that their eating is out of control. Often, they feel guilty, anxious, and/or depressed. They purge their bodies of the food that they fear will make them gain weight. While some people force themselves to vomit, others may use laxatives, enemas, and diuretics; others may fast or exercise excessively. A vicious cycle develops. People with bulimia may binge and purge from one or two times a month to several times a day. Many people who are suffering from bulimia may become secretive about their eating habits and withdraw from friends and family.

Who suffers from bulimia nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa affects 1 to 3 percent of the population. Bulimia affects people from all ethnic and cultural groups. Most persons with bulimia are young females, but bulimia can also be a problem for older women, girls, men, and boys. Estimates are that 5 to 10 percent of people with bulimia are male and that this rate is increasing.

What causes bulimia nervosa?

It is not known what causes bulimia nervosa, but it is influenced by a number of factors. These factors can include cultural, family and peer pressures, chemical imbalances, genetics, and

emotional problems. Images of “ideal bodies” in the media often lead to unrealistic and unattainable goals regarding body shape and weight. Persons involved in gymnastics, ballet, wrestling, or other sports that emphasize low body weight may be at increased risk. Negative emotions or events such as abuse or the death of a loved one can trigger bulimia. Even happy events, such as giving birth or going to college, can also trigger bulimia. People with bulimia often suffer from low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, and intense dissatisfaction with the way they look. Individuals with bulimia often have a negative body image and may overestimate the size of their body, although they may have a normal body weight.

Why is it important to seek treatment for bulimia nervosa?

Many people who suffer from bulimia nervosa never seek treatment. However, bulimia rarely goes away by itself. If untreated, the disorder can lead to health problems. People with bulimia suffer higher rates of other psychological problems including depression and anxiety. People with bulimia are at increased risk to abuse substances. These may include alcohol, street drugs, laxatives, appetite suppressants, diuretics, and drugs that induce vomiting.

In extreme cases, it can cause ruptures in the stomach or esophagus (food pipe) and can lead to heart problems. Bingeing and purging can also result in water retention, swelling, abdominal bloating, loss of important minerals, heartburn,

indigestion, and sore throat. The acid in vomit can cause dental problems including tooth erosion, cavities, and gum problems. Women and girls with bulimia may also experience irregular menstrual periods.

Does treatment really work?

Most cases of bulimia nervosa can be treated successfully by psychologists, social workers, family therapists, and psychiatrists with experience in eating disorders. In some instances a team may be involved in treatment, including dietitians and case managers. While a medical evaluation is recommended, most treatments for bulimia do not require a hospital stay. But treatments do not work instantly. They can be difficult and require hard work from the patient and the family.

Treatment for bulimia may include a combination of individual and/or group psychotherapy and medications (like certain antidepressants). Psychotherapy, namely cognitive-behavioral therapy, has been shown to improve self-control and decrease the behaviors that lead to bingeing. Family or couples therapy may be a part of the treatment plan. Therapists can guide family members in understanding bulimia and learning new techniques for coping with problems. The sooner treatment starts the better. As with most problems, the treatment is most successful if the problem 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.

- *Seek professional help.* Talk with your personal physician, behavioral medicine specialist, or psychiatry department.

- *Set attainable 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.

How can you help someone with bulimia nervosa?

- Educate yourself about bulimia nervosa.
- Let them know you care and you want to help.
- Don't pressure about eating or talk about weight or food.
- Encourage them to seek professional help.
- Be patient. It 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 seek treatment in the future.

Recommended Reading

Bulimia: A Guide to Recovery, L. Hall and L. Cohn, Gurze Designs and Books, 1999. ISBN: 093607731X.

When Girls Feel Fat: Helping Girls Through Adolescence, S. Freidman, Harper-Collins. ISBN: 0006385613.

Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends, M. Siegel and J. Brisman, Harper-Collins, 1997. ISBN: 0060952334.

Recommended Websites

American Anorexia/Bulimia Association (AABA)

www.aabainc.org

Something Fishy

www.something-fishy.org

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 excessively
- withdrawing from family and friends
- experiencing periods of uncontrolled eating
- purposely causing yourself to vomit or using laxatives frequently.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org. Here you'll find the Health Encyclopedia, which offers more in-depth information on this and many other topics.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

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.