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1-800-994-9662

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Bulimia Nervosa

Q: What is bulimia?

A: Bulimia nervosa (buh-LEE-me-ah nur-VOH-suh), often called bulimia, is a type of eating disorder. A person with bulimia eats a lot of food in a short amount of time (binging) and then tries to prevent weight gain by getting rid of the food (purging). Purging might be done by:

- Making yourself throw up
- Taking laxatives (pills or liquids that speed up the movement of food through your body and lead to a bowel movement)

A person with bulimia feels he or she cannot control the amount of food eaten. Also, bulimics might exercise a lot, eat very little or not at all, or take pills to pass urine often to prevent weight gain.

Unlike anorexia, people with bulimia can fall within the normal range for

their age and weight. But **like** people with anorexia, bulimics:

- Fear gaining weight
- Want desperately to lose weight
- Are very unhappy with their body size and shape

Q: Who becomes bulimic?

A: Many people think that eating disorders affect only young, upper-class White females. It is true that most bulimics are women (around 85-90 percent). But bulimia affects people from all walks of life, including males, women of color, and even older women. It is not known for sure whether African American, Latina, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian and Alaska Native people develop eating disorders because American culture values thin people. People with different cultural backgrounds may develop eating disorders because it's hard to adapt to a new culture (a theory called "culture clash"). The stress of trying to live in two different cultures may cause some minorities to develop their eating disorders.



It was ten years ago when I became bulimic. I had always worried about my weight and how I looked. I thought I looked fat, no matter what the scale showed or anyone said. But I had never made myself throw up — not until after college. I felt stressed out after graduating from college. I was very overwhelmed with my new job and turned to food to feel more in control of my life. Sometimes, I'd eat a lot of food and throw it up. Other times, I'd throw up a normal meal. At the time, it seemed like the only way I could cope with my stress. Luckily, I got help from a doctor, after a friend talked to me about the problem. It took a lot of work, but I am better now.



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Q: What causes bulimia?

A: Bulimia is more than just a problem with food. A binge can be triggered by dieting, stress, or uncomfortable emotions, such as anger or sadness. Purging and other actions to prevent weight gain are ways for people with bulimia to feel more in control of their lives and ease stress and anxiety. There is no single known cause of bulimia, but there are some factors that may play a part.

- **Culture.** Women in the U.S. are under constant pressure to fit a certain ideal of beauty. Seeing images of flawless, thin females everywhere makes it hard for women to feel good about their bodies.
- **Families.** If you have a mother or sister with bulimia, you are more likely to also have bulimia. Parents who think looks are important, diet themselves, or criticize their children's bodies are more likely to have a child with bulimia.
- **Life changes or stressful events.** Traumatic events (like rape), as well as stressful things (like starting a new job), can lead to bulimia.
- **Personality traits.** A person with bulimia may not like herself, hate the way she looks, or feel hopeless. She may be very moody, have problems expressing anger, or have a hard time controlling impulsive behaviors.
- **Biology.** Genes, hormones, and chemicals in the brain may be factors in developing bulimia.

Q: What are signs of bulimia?

A: A person with bulimia may be thin, overweight, or have a normal weight. Also, bulimic behavior, such as throw-

ing up, is often done in private because the person with bulimia feels shame or disgust. This makes it hard to know if someone has bulimia. But there are warning signs to look out for. Someone with bulimia may use extreme measures to lose weight by:

- Using diet pills, or taking pills to urinate or have a bowel movement
- Going to the bathroom all the time after eating (to throw up)
- Exercising a lot, even in bad weather or when hurt or tired

Someone with bulimia may show signs of throwing up, such as:

- Swollen cheeks or jaw area
- Calluses or scrapes on the knuckles (if using fingers to induce vomiting)
- Teeth that look clear
- Broken blood vessels in the eyes

People with bulimia often have other mental health conditions, including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Substance abuse problems

Someone with bulimia may also have a distorted body image, shown by thinking she or he is fat, hating her or his body, and fearing weight gain.

Bulimia can also cause someone to not act like her or himself. She or he may be moody or sad, or may not want to go out with friends.

Q: What happens to someone who has bulimia?

A: Bulimia can be very harmful to the body. Look at the picture to find out how bulimia affects your health.

