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# Understanding Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia nervosa is a serious mental health disorder that can be life threatening. A person with this disorder has a problem with food. Having this eating disorder is nothing to be ashamed of. Talk with your healthcare provider or another person you trust. You may find it can be a relief just to tell someone. Your healthcare provider can also suggest treatments that may help.

## What is bulimia?

People with bulimia go through cycles of binge eating and purging. In binge eating, you eat huge amounts of food at one time. Often these are foods high in sugar and fat. Examples are ice cream and cake. Purging means you try to get rid of what you've eaten. Some people do this by making themselves vomit. Others use laxatives, enemas, or water pills. Instead of purging, some people exercise too much. Or they may just stop eating for a while. The cycle of bingeing and purging may occur once or twice a week. It can also happen more often. There are also times between problem eating patterns when eating is normal.

## Who does it affect?

Bulimia mainly strikes teenage and young adult women. But it can affect anyone. No one knows just what causes it. A brain chemical known as serotonin may be involved. Your genes may also play a role. Peer pressure and the value the culture places on being thin may affect you as well.

## Treatment can help

If you have bulimia, you feel out of control. You also feel guilty and ashamed. As a result, you may try to hide your eating problem from others. Bulimia won't go away on its own in most cases. Telling someone is the first step. The second is getting treatment. There are many people who can help. These include doctors, nurses, and mental health providers. Ask a trusted friend or family member to go with you if you need support for the first office visit.

## The effects of bulimia

Over time, bulimia can cause many health problems. In some cases, it may damage your kidneys. It can also cause lead to heart damage. There may be a link between bulimia nervosa and diabetes. It can also lead to these problems:

- Swelling (inflammation) of your pancreas. This is a gland that makes hormones and enzymes that help digest food.
- Tooth decay from stomach acid
- Swelling of your throat
- An imbalance of water and minerals in your body. This leads to serious health problems.
- Reproductive, skeletal, and immune system problems

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- Difficulty concentrating
  - Muscle weakness
  - Dehydration
  - Constipation

People with bulimia nervosa can also struggle with:

- Self-injury. This includes cutting and other forms of self-harm but not attempted suicide.
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Acting on impulse. Examples are risky sexual behaviors and shoplifting.