

# Food Trouble

At one time or another, a surprising number of people find that they have troubles with food. They can't eat enough. They eat too much. They don't choose nutritious foods.

And some develop an eating disorder known as *bulimia*.

## What Is Bulimia?

Bulimia involves eating more food at one time than you think you should (binge eating). Then trying to get rid of that food by throwing up or using laxatives (purging).

Some people with bulimia use diuretics to lose fluid weight.

Some people exercise excessively in order to burn off the extra calories they eat when they binge.

This behavior may occur only occasionally, weekly or many times a day.

Bulimia may be a temporary or sporadic problem. But for some it can become a way of life.

## What Are the Health Consequences?

Because people who have bulimia get rid of the food they eat, they are at risk for all of the problems associated with malnutrition and dehydration.

### PROBLEMS INCLUDE:

- fatigue; lack of energy
- fainting spells
- skin rashes and hair loss
- amenorrhea (absence of menstrual periods)
- osteoporosis (loss of calcium from the bones), bone weakening and fractures
- inability to think clearly

### VOMITING CAN CAUSE:

- irritation or bleeding of the esophagus (the tube that connects the throat to the stomach)
- tooth damage from the stomach acid
- swelling of the abdomen
- muscle cramping
- seizures
- erratic heartbeat; damage to the heart muscle

### LAXATIVE ABUSE CAN CAUSE:

- constipation, cramping, nausea
- allergic reactions to the laxative ingredients
- decreased absorption of nutrients and medications (such as birth control pills)

These conditions are harmful to physical and emotional well-being, and may have a great impact on success—in school, in a relationship or in a career.

Some people who are bulimic are depressed, even to the point of considering suicide.

## Who Is at Risk for Becoming Bulimic?

Anyone can become bulimic. In the United States, bulimia is most common in young women. This may be because our society puts so much emphasis on body image and thinness in advertising and attitudes about women.

However, men and women of any age can develop bulimia.

### PEOPLE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO BULIMIA OFTEN HAVE:

- low self-esteem
- major family or relationship problems
- a history of sexual abuse
- a history of substance abuse
- a family who makes weight a major issue
- careers or activities in which maintaining a low or specific weight is necessary or desirable—dancers, gymnasts, models, wrestlers
- a living environment where body image is emphasized

Although these people are at increased risk of developing bulimia, anyone can become bulimic if the circumstances are right.

## How Can You Tell if Someone Is Bulimic?

Perhaps you're concerned that a friend might be bulimic. Maybe you wonder whether some of your own patterns of behavior are signs of bulimia. How can you tell?

### PEOPLE WITH BULIMIA MIGHT:

- eat large quantities of food at once
- vary greatly in the amount they eat from one meal to the next
- have eating habits significantly different from those of family or friends
- make trips to the bathroom shortly after every meal or after a certain meal each day
- exercise excessively, often without a training goal
- diet frequently
- be afraid of being fat
- have an unusual preoccupation with food and food-related topics
- stop having normal menstrual cycles (if female)



## What Can You Do About Bulimia?

The first step is to recognize the problem. Most people with bulimia feel ashamed. But there's no logical reason to be. Bulimia is an illness, not a character defect. It can be treated. People who have bulimia can and do recover.

Some people find that they can stop bulimic behaviors on their own.

### TIPS TO HELP INCLUDE:

- Get information on eating well.
- Eat meals at regular intervals.
- Eat with friends.
- Exercise no more than 30 minutes, 3–4 times a week.
- Find a friend to be a support person and talk to that person about the problem.

### IF YOU THINK A FRIEND HAS BULIMIA:

- Express your concern.
- Find out if she or he is interested in help.
- Offer to help find professional help.
- Offer to go along on the first visit.
- Assure your friend that all visits with a health care provider are confidential (unless there are immediate life-threatening concerns).
- Don't blame yourself if your friend is not yet willing to acknowledge the problem or change the bulimic behaviors. It can take a person a long time to accept that she or he is bulimic.

No one can “fix” another person's bulimia. The desire to change has to come from within.

## Where to Get Help

If you think you may have bulimia or are concerned about a friend, you can get help. Many people with bulimia need professional help.

Your regular health care provider can deal with the immediate medical problems and direct you to other resources:

**Internists and family practice physicians** can help monitor body chemistry and health status.

**Dietitians** can help assess nutritional needs and design a health-promoting eating plan.

**Health educators** can help you figure out how to improve eating and exercise practices and develop related skills.

**Psychologists/mental health counselors** can help you deal with any psychological or emotional concerns that are standing in the way of recovery.

**Group therapy** can provide perspective and support from other people who have bulimia.

## 3 Essential “First Steps” to Recovery

**Recognize** that you have bulimia.

**Acknowledge** that it's a health problem.

**Want** to change.

Once you've taken these steps, there are people eager to help you make the changes to become well.

Remember, it takes a long time to develop bulimia, and it will take more than a couple of weeks to recover.

This brochure is not intended as a substitute for your health professional's opinion or care.

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HELP ON THE WAY

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