

Bulimia is an eating disorder which involves the compulsive eating of large quantities of food over a short space of time. The Binges are usually followed by periods of strict dieting and purging.

What to look for

- alternating bingeing and purging.
- unrealistic fear of becoming fat.
- weight fluctuation (although relatively normal weight may be maintained).
- food cravings.
- overuse of laxatives.
- depression.
- tooth enamel erosion, gum infections, cavities, and tooth discolouration
- gastrointestinal upset.

Bulimia is an eating disorder that, like anorexia nervosa, is psychological in origin and both involve an obsession with food and weight and can have fatal consequences. While anorexics simply starve themselves, Bulimics binge on food and then purge by self-induced vomiting. Bulimics also frequently use diet pills, laxatives, and diuretics to reduce their weight. They are usually secretive about their bingeing so therefore it may take quite a while before the problem is detected.

Bulimia can occur on its own or with anorexia. Despite their overlap, the two disorders are associated with some different personality traits: Anorexics are apt to suppress all urges, including sexual ones; Bulimics, on the other hand, tend to indulge their desires, impulsively getting into trouble with drugs, sexual promiscuity, shoplifting, or binge buying.

How well a bulimic person is depends on how often they binge and purge. They may vomit occasionally or very frequently. Physical repercussions include swelling of the stomach or pancreas, inflammation of the oesophagus, enlarged salivary glands, and tooth decay and gum disease from vomiting stomach acids.

Frequent vomiting also depletes the water and potassium in bodily tissues, causing abnormal heart rhythms, muscle spasms, and even paralysis. In severe cases, some of these physical problems can lead to death. Suicide is also of concern among these patients.

Bulimia is an illness that needs to be monitored by professionals and in most cases the Bulimics will not regain health on their own.

Causes

Pressures and conflicts within the family are thought to be the primary cause of bulimia. A bulimic is apt to be an over-achiever and perfectionist who feels she can't live up to her parents' expectations. She has low self-esteem and often suffers from depression. A history of abuse is common in bulimia sufferers.

Traditional Treatment

Successful treatment depends on the person involved realising that they have a problem and that their health is in danger. Treatment with an experienced doctor or psychologist is the usual treatment as well as training in nutrition. There are clinics which specialise in treatment of bulimic patients; it is vital that all doctors and specialists involved work together.

Antidepressants are now used in bulimia therapy regularly.

Dietary considerations

The bulimic should be on a balanced diet of all the main food groups, avoiding sugar. Also eliminate alcohol, caffeine, flavour enhancers, most salt, and cigarettes. Supplement daily with vitamin C, vitamin B complex, and a multivitamin/multi-mineral supplement.

When to seek further professional advice

- you find yourself secretly bingeing, then vomiting or using laxatives.
- you avoid eating in front of other people.
- your child has an unreasonable fear of being fat and thinks she's fat when she's not.
- your child avoids eating with others or goes to the bathroom immediately after meals.