Important Information about Bulimia Nervosa in Children and Teens for Parents

What Is Bulimia Nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder that commonly occurs in adolescent girls and rarely occurs in males. It is defined by episodes of “binge” eating or eating large quantities of food in a short time. This behavior may be severe with very large quantities of food being eaten, often containing carbohydrates or fat. People who struggle with bulimia try to prevent weight gain that would normally occur after bingeing by following the binge-eating with periods of food restriction, vomiting, laxative abuse, and/or excessive exercising (otherwise known as “purging”). In severe cases, when vomiting is used, the binge episodes may become more common with the cycles repeating over several hours. Without treatment, the severity of this eating disorder increases and the teen’s life becomes more chaotic and focused on purging behavior. The drive to eat is so strong that the teen may steal food in order to satisfy his or her compulsion. Teens with this disorder are usually ashamed of their behavior, so they often keep their bingeing secret because of the guilt associated with eating and weight control.

Who Has Bulimia Nervosa?

Many people don’t know when a family member or friend has bulimia because the binge-eating and purging (ridding the body of calories by laxative use, vomiting, or excessive exercise) occurs in private and there may not be noticeable weight loss or weight gain.

What Are Common Signs or Symptoms of Bulimia Nervosa?

- Dental cavities
- Enlarged parotid glands, which are by the back portion of the face below the jaws
- Puffy cheeks
- Uncontrollable gastro-esophageal reflux
- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Constipation
- Secret eating or large amounts of food disappearing
- Excessive exercise
- Preoccupation with food
- Going to the bathroom directly following meals
- Using laxatives and vomiting to control weight
- Intestinal problems from frequent laxative use
- Kidney problems from use of “water” pills (diuretics)
- Irregular heartbeat
- Muscle weakness or fatigue
What Causes Bulimia Nervosa?
Eating disorders have been called “brain circuit disorders” because there is emerging evidence that the way in which the brains of affected individuals respond to food, eating and body image is different, so that what is positive for most people is either threatening or overly rewarding for those with an eating disorder. Worry, stress, or feeling angry, lonely or abandoned are common triggers to binge eating. Dieting and missing meals as a form of weight control may trigger food cravings and overeating. Sometimes bulimia can develop as a complication of some emotional trauma or upsetting event, such as family breakdown, death of a friend or relative, or abuse. Other risk factors for the development of bulimia include poor self-esteem, extreme anxiety, and a highly sensitive nature, or a family history of substance abuse.

What Are the Treatments for Bulimia Nervosa?
As with anorexia nervosa, restoring nutritional balance and maintaining structured nutritional intake is central to the success of counseling by a trained mental health provider/counselor is one of the primary treatments used for people with this disorder. This therapy should help the person to understand the complex emotions that trigger bingeing and purging behaviors. The counseling is often directed toward the person’s distorted self-image, uncontrollable and excessive eating, profound guilt, and embarrassment. Treatment usually includes the use of antidepressants (especially selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and/or other medications to help the obsessive thinking and uncontrollable compulsive behaviors. Occasionally, some teens need to be admitted to the hospital if their fluid loss is extreme and/or health is threatened (e.g., if heart rate becomes too irregular or if blood pressure becomes too low). Sometimes intermediately intensive partial hospitalization programs are required to interrupt the harmful dieting-binge eating-purging cycle that can trap individuals.

What Can I Do to Help?
- Strongly suggest that the teen get help
- Be positive and supportive
- Be empathetic to the teen’s feelings
- Go to a support group
- Don’t blame the teen
- Give written information that encourages the teen to get help early

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