What Is Bulimia Nervosa?

Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder that most commonly occurs in adolescent girls, but can occur 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 amounts of food being consumed, often containing carbohydrates and fat. Teens who struggle with bulimia try to prevent weight gain that would normally occur after binge-eating by not eating for a period of time, vomiting, using laxatives and/or excessive exercising (otherwise known as “purging”). In severe cases when vomiting is used, the binging may become more frequent. Without treatment, this disorder can become severe. The drive to eat can become so strong that people with this disorder may even steal food to satisfy their compulsive eating. Teens are often ashamed of their behavior, so they often binge in secret.

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) often occurs in private, and there may not be visible weight loss or weight gain.

What Are Common Signs or Symptoms of Bulimia Nervosa?

- Dental cavities
- Enlarged parotid glands, which are in the back portion of the face, below the jaws
- Puffy cheeks
- Uncontrollable stomach acid that comes up in the throat
- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Constipation
- Secret eating or large amounts of food inexplicably 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 are caused by many things, but a common feature of bulimia is changes in the reward system of the brain, which drives much of the behaviors. Worry, stress, or feeling angry or lonely may trigger binge eating. Dieting and missing meals as a form of weight control may also trigger food cravings and overeating. Sometimes bulimia can develop after an emotional trauma or upsetting event (e.g., family breakdown, death of a friend or relative, abuse). Other risk factors for the development of bulimia include poor self-esteem, extreme anxiety, and a highly sensitive nature (anxious).
What Are the Treatments for Bulimia Nervosa?

Counseling by a trained mental healthcare provider/counselor is one of the primary treatments used for teens with this disorder. But effective therapy requires a well-nourished body and brain, meaning that focusing on eating and weight control patterns is also important. This therapy should help these teens to understand the complex emotions that trigger these bingeing and purging behaviors. Counseling is often directed toward the teen’s distorted self-image as well as the excessive eating and guilt. Treatment often includes the use of antidepressants and/or other medications to help the obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviors. Some teens need to be admitted to a partial hospital program to break the cycle of binge eating and purging while receiving intensive mental health treatment, or to the hospital if their fluid loss is extreme and/or their health is threatened (e.g., if the heart rate becomes too irregular or if their blood pressure becomes too low).

What Can I Do?

If you think that you or a friend has this eating disorder, talk to your doctor/nurse practitioner, parent, or trusted adult about it right away. The earlier that treatment is started, the better. You won’t be helping yourself or your friend by keeping it a secret.