

Bulimia Nervosa

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Bulimia Nervosa is a serious mental illness that requires treatment; it is not a lifestyle choice.

Bulimia Nervosa is characterised by repeated episodes of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviours.

What is binge eating?

Binge eating involves two key features:

- Eating a very large amount of food within a relatively short period of time (e.g. within two hours)
- Feeling a sense of loss of control while eating (e.g. feeling unable to stop yourself from eating)

What are compensatory behaviours?

Compensatory behaviours are employed to compensate for binge eating episodes and as a way of trying to control weight. They include:

- Vomiting
- Misusing laxatives or diuretics
- Fasting
- Excessive exercise
- Use of any drugs, illicit, prescription and/or 'over the counter' inappropriately for weight control (inappropriate use refers to use that is not indicated and for which the drug has not been prescribed).

A person with Bulimia Nervosa can become lost in a dangerous cycle of eating out of control and attempts to compensate which can lead to feelings of shame, guilt and disgust. These behaviours can become more compulsive and uncontrollable over time, and lead to an obsession with food, thoughts about eating (or not eating), weight loss, dieting and body image.

These behaviours are often concealed and people with Bulimia Nervosa can go to great lengths to keep their eating and exercise habits secret. As a result, Bulimia Nervosa can often go undetected for a long period of time.

Many people with Bulimia Nervosa experience weight fluctuations and do not lose weight; they can remain in the normal weight range, be slightly underweight, or may even gain weight.



Defining Bulimia Nervosa:

Frequent episodes of binge eating

A person with Bulimia Nervosa will repeatedly engage in binge eating episodes where they eat a large amount of food in a short period of time. During these episodes they will feel a loss of control over their eating and may not be able to stop even if they want to.

Compensatory behaviours

Compensatory weight control behaviours are methods which people with Bulimia Nervosa will employ in attempt to 'balance out' or 'make up' for their binge eating. These include self induced vomiting, over exercising or misusing laxatives, enemas or diuretics and fasting.

Preoccupation with body shape

People with Bulimia Nervosa place an excessive amount of emphasis on their bodies, shape and weight. This can lead to the person's sense of self and self worth being wholly defined by the way they look.

There are two subtypes of Bulimia Nervosa:

Purging Subtype

The Purging Subtype of Bulimia Nervosa occurs when a person regularly induces vomiting or misuses laxatives, enemas or diuretics to compensate for episodes of binge eating.

Non-Purging Subtype

The Non-Purging Subtype of Bulimia Nervosa occurs when a person engages in regular fasting or excessive exercise, but does not demonstrate purging behaviours such as vomiting or misusing laxatives.

What are the warning signs of Bulimia Nervosa?

Having awareness about Bulimia Nervosa and its warning signs and symptoms can make a marked difference to the severity and duration of the illness. Seeking help at the first warning sign is much more effective than waiting until the illness is in full swing. If you or someone you know is exhibiting some or a combination of these signs it is vital to seek help and support as soon as possible.

The warning signs of Bulimia Nervosa can be physical, psychological and behavioural. It is possible for someone with Bulimia Nervosa to display a combination of these symptoms.

Physical signs:

- Frequent changes in weight (loss or gains)
- Signs of damage due to vomiting including swelling around the cheeks or jaw, calluses on knuckles, damage to teeth and bad breath



- Feeling bloated, constipated or developing intolerances to food
- Loss of or disturbance of menstrual periods in girls and women
- Fainting or dizziness
- Feeling tired and not sleeping well

Psychological Signs:

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and weight
- Sensitivity to comments relating to food, weight, body shape or exercise
- Low self esteem and feelings of shame, self loathing or guilt, particularly after eating
- Having a distorted body image (e.g. seeing themselves as fat even if they are in a healthy weight range for their age and height)
- Obsession with food and need for control
- Depression, anxiety or irritability
- Extreme body dissatisfaction

Behavioural Signs:

- Evidence of binge eating (e.g. disappearance of food)
- Vomiting or using laxatives, enemas, appetite suppressants or diuretics
- Eating in private and avoiding meals with other people
- Anti social behaviour, spending more and more time alone
- Repetitive or obsessive behaviours relating to body shape and weight (e.g. weighing themselves repeatedly, looking in the mirror obsessively and pinching waist or wrists)
- Secretive behaviour around food (e.g. saying they have eaten when they haven't, hiding uneaten food in their rooms)
- Compulsive or excessive exercising (e.g. including exercising in bad weather, in spite of sickness, injury or social events and experiencing distress if exercise is not possible)
- Dieting behaviour (e.g. fasting, counting calories/kilojoules, avoiding food groups such as fats and carbohydrates)
- Frequent trips to the bathroom during or shortly after meals which could be evidence of vomiting or laxative use
- Erratic behaviour (e.g. spending large amounts of money on food)
- Self harm, substance abuse or suicide attempts

What are the risks associated with Bulimia Nervosa?

The risks associated with Bulimia Nervosa are severe. People with Bulimia Nervosa may experience:

- Chronic sore throat, indigestion, heartburn and reflux
- Inflammation and rupture of the oesophagus and stomach from frequent vomiting
- Stomach and intestinal ulcers
- Chronic irregular bowel movements, constipation and/or diarrhoea due to deliberate misuse of laxatives



- Osteoporosis– a condition that can lead to human bones becoming fragile and easy to fracture
- Loss of or disturbance of menstrual periods in girls and women
- Increased risk of infertility in men and women
- Irregular or slow heart beat which can lead to an increased risk of heart failure

Is it possible to recover?

Yes. It is possible to recover from Bulimia Nervosa, even if you have been living with the illness for many years. The path to recovery can be very challenging. People with Bulimia Nervosa can become entangled in a vicious cycle of eating and exercise behaviours that can impact their ability to think clearly and make decisions. However, with the right team and a high level of personal commitment, recovery is an achievable goal. Treatments for Bulimia Nervosa are available; seek help from a professional with specialised knowledge in eating disorders.

Getting help

If you suspect that you or someone you know has Bulimia Nervosa, it is important to seek help immediately. The earlier you seek help the closer you are to recovery. While your GP may not be a specialist in eating disorders, they are a good ‘first base.’ A GP can provide a referral to a practitioner with specialised knowledge in health, nutrition and eating disorders.

To find help in your local area go to www.nedc.com.au/helplines

The NEDC constantly reviews research evidence on eating disorders. Recent research can be found at www.nedc.com.au/research-resources Each of the publications of the NEDC also draw on an extensive review of evidence and expert opinion. NEDC publications and their bibliographies can be found at www.nedc.com.au/nedc-publications In addition to NEDC publications, this fact sheet has drawn on other sources of information which can be found at www.nedc.com.au/fact-sheet-bibliography

