**Bulimia**

Bulimia is where someone is binge eating, then making themselves vomit or using laxatives to purge the food from their body.

[Bulimia – NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions//bulimia>

# Overview – Bulimia

**Bulimia is an eating disorder and mental health condition.**

People who have bulimia go through periods where they eat a lot of food in a very short amount of time (binge eating) and then purge the food from their body to try to stop themselves gaining weight.

Purging could include making themselves vomit, using laxatives (medicine to help them poo) or diuretics (medicine that makes you pee more), fasting or doing excessive exercise, or a combination of these.

Anyone can get bulimia, but it is more common in young people aged 15 to 25.

## **Symptoms of bulimia**

Symptoms of bulimia include:

* eating very large amounts of food in a short time, often in an out-of-control way – this is called binge eating
* making yourself vomit, using laxatives or diuretics, fasting, or doing an extreme amount of exercise after a binge to avoid putting on weight – this is called purging
* fear of putting on weight
* being very critical about your weight and body shape
* mood changes – for example, feeling very tense or anxious

These symptoms may not be easy to spot in someone else because bulimia can make people behave very secretively.

[Read more about the symptoms of bulimia and warning signs in others](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/symptoms/)

## **Getting help for bulimia**

Getting help and support as soon as possible gives you the best chance of recovering from bulimia.

If you think you may have bulimia, see a GP as soon as you can.

They'll ask you questions about your eating habits and how you're feeling and will check your overall health and weight.

If they think you may have bulimia or another eating disorder, they should refer you to an eating disorder specialist or team of specialists.

It can be very hard to admit you have a problem and ask for help. It may make things easier if you bring a friend or loved one with you to your appointment.

You can also talk in confidence to an adviser from the eating disorders charity [Beat](http://www.b-eat.co.uk/) by calling their helpline on 0808 801 0677.

### **Getting help for someone else**

If you're concerned that someone close to you may have bulimia, let them know you're worried about them and encourage them to see a GP. You could offer to go along with them.

Read more about [talking to your child about eating disorders](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/advice-for-parents/) and [supporting someone with an eating disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/advice-for-life-situations-and-events/how-to-help-someone-with-eating-disorder/).

## **Treatment for bulimia**

You can recover from bulimia, but it may take time and recovery will be different for everyone.

Your treatment plan will be tailored to you and should take into account any other support you might need, such as for depression or anxiety.

If you're over 18, you'll probably be offered a guided self-help programme. This involves working through a self-help book or online programme, and often includes keeping a diary and making a plan for your meals.

You'll be supported by a therapist during this process. You may also be offered [cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/overview/).

If you're under 18, you may be offered family therapy or CBT. This may be offered through your local [children and young people's mental health services.](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/mental-health-support/mental-health-services/)

[Read more about treatments for bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/treatment/)

## **Health risks of bulimia**

Bulimia can eventually lead to physical problems associated with not getting the right nutrients, vomiting a lot, or overusing laxatives.

Possible complications include:

* feeling tired and weak
* dental problems – stomach acid from persistent vomiting can damage tooth enamel
* [bad breath](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bad-breath/), a [sore throat](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sore-throat/), or even tears in the lining of the throat – also caused by stomach acid
* [irregular or absent periods](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/irregular-periods/)
* dry skin and hair
* brittle fingernails
* swollen glands
* fits and muscle spasms
* heart, kidney or bowel problems, including constipation
* bone problems – you may be more likely to develop problems such as low bone density (osteopenia) particularly if you have had symptoms of both bulimia and [anorexia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/anorexia/overview/)

## **Causes of bulimia**

We do not know exactly what causes bulimia and other eating disorders.

You may be more likely to get an eating disorder if:

* you or a member of your family has a history of eating disorders, depression, or alcohol or drug addiction
* you have been criticised for your eating habits, body shape or weight
* you're overly concerned with being slim, particularly if you also feel pressure from society or your job
* you have anxiety, low self-esteem or an obsessive personality
* you've experienced a stressful event or trauma, such as physical or sexual abuse

### **Binge-purge cycle**

Bulimia is often a vicious cycle of binging and purging, triggered by things such as hunger, sadness or stress.

Periods of excessive eating and loss of control (binge eating) may be used as a way of coping with difficult emotions. You may then feel guilty or ashamed.

You then purge to get rid of the calories, leaving you feeling hungry again, and the cycle continues.

You may set very strict rules for yourself about dieting, eating or exercising.

## More in [Bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/)

[Overview - Bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/overview/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions//bulimia/overview/>

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# Symptoms – Bulimia

**The main signs of bulimia are eating a large amount of food over a very short time (binge eating) and then ridding your body of the extra food (purging) by making yourself vomit, taking laxatives or diuretics, fasting or exercising excessively, or a combination of these.**

Other signs of bulimia include:

* fear of putting on weight
* being very critical about your weight and body shape
* mood changes – feeling very tense or anxious, for example
* thinking about food a lot
* feeling guilty and ashamed, and behaving secretively
* avoiding social activities that involve food
* feeling like you have no control over your eating

You may also notice physical signs like:

* feeling tired
* a sore throat from being sick
* bloating or tummy pain
* a puffy face
* [self-harming](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/self-harm/getting-help/)

## **Warning signs of bulimia in someone else**

The following warning signs could indicate that someone you care about has an eating disorder:

* eating a lot of food, very fast
* going to the bathroom a lot after eating
* excessively or obsessively exercising

## **Getting help**

Getting help and support as soon as possible gives you the best chance of recovering from bulimia.

If you think you may have bulimia, see a GP as soon as possible.

If you are concerned that someone close to you may have bulimia, let them know you are worried about them and encourage them to see a GP. You could offer to go along with them.

You can also talk in confidence to an adviser from eating disorders charity [Beat](https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/), by calling their helpline on 0808 801 0677.

## More in [Bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/)

[Symptoms - Bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/symptoms/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions//bulimia/symptoms/>

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# Treatment - Bulimia

**Treatment may take time, but you can recover from bulimia.**

Treatment for bulimia is slightly different for adults and those under 18 years old.

## **Treatment for adults**

### **Guided help**

You will probably be offered a guided self-help programme as a first step in treating your bulimia. This often involves working through a self-help book or online programme combined with sessions with a healthcare professional, such as a therapist.

Joining a self-help support group, like one of the [Beat online support groups](https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/get-help-for-myself/online-support/) for people with bulimia, may be helpful to you.

If self-help treatment alone is not enough or has not helped you after 4 weeks, you may be offered [cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/overview/) or another type of therapy, as well as a medicine.

### **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)**

If you are offered CBT, it will usually involve up to 20 sessions across 20 weeks.

CBT involves talking to a therapist, who will help you explore emotions and thoughts that could be contributing to your eating disorder, and how you feel about your weight and body shape.

They will help you to adopt regular eating habits and show you how to stick to them. They should also show you ways to manage difficult feelings and situations to stop you from relapsing once your therapy ends.

## **Treatment for children and young people**

### **Family therapy**

Children and young people will usually be offered family therapy. This involves you and your family talking to a therapist, exploring how bulimia has affected you and how your family can support you to get better. This may be offered through your local [children and young people's mental health services.](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/mental-health-support/mental-health-services/)

If family therapy is not suitable, you may be offered CBT, which will be similar to the CBT offered to adults.

## **Looking after yourself**

It's important to look after your health while recovering from bulimia.

If you are vomiting regularly, the acid in your vomit can damage your teeth over time. In order to minimise this damage, you should:

* avoid brushing your teeth immediately after vomiting so you do not wear away the enamel
* rinse your mouth with a non-acidic mouthwash
* make sure you see your dentist regularly
* do not drink or eat acidic foods, such as fruit juice, during a binge and after purging
* do not smoke

Vomiting can also lead to risk of [dehydration](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dehydration/). You can be treated for this if needed.

## **Medicine**

[Antidepressants](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/medicines-and-psychiatry/antidepressants/overview/) should not be offered as the only treatment for bulimia. But you may be offered an antidepressant, such as [fluoxetine (Prozac)](https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/fluoxetine-prozac/), in combination with therapy or self-help treatment, to help you manage other conditions, such as:

* [anxiety](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/) or [depression](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/depression-in-adults/overview/)
* [social anxiety (social phobia)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/social-anxiety/)
* [obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/overview/)

Antidepressants are rarely prescribed for children or young people under 18.

## **Where treatment will happen**

Most people with bulimia will be able to stay at home during their treatment. You'll usually have appointments at your clinic and then be able to go home.

However, you may be admitted to hospital if you have serious health complications, including:

* being very underweight
* being very ill and your life being at risk
* being under 18 and your doctors believing you do not have enough support at home
* doctors being worried that you might [harm yourself](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/self-harm/getting-help/) or are at risk of [suicide](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/help-for-suicidal-thoughts/)

Your doctors will keep a very careful eye on your weight and health if you're being cared for in hospital. They will help you to reach a healthy weight gradually, and either start or continue any therapy you're having.

Once they are happy with your weight, as well as your physical and mental health, you should be able to return home.

## **Further support for bulimia**

There are many organisations that support people with bulimia and their families, including:

* [Beat: beating eating disorders](https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/)
* [Mental Health Foundation](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/)
* [Mind](https://www.mind.org.uk/)

## More in [Bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/)

[Treatment - Bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/treatment/)

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[Bulimia - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/)

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