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Bulimia

Bulimia (bulimia nervosa) is an eating disorder and serious mental health condition. It can affect anyone and treatment may take time, but you can recover from it.

Get urgent help

Support is available if you or someone you know is having a mental health crisis or emergency, no matter what you're going through.

[Find out where to get urgent help for mental health](#)

Symptoms of bulimia

The main signs of bulimia are:

- losing control of how much you're eating over a very short time (binge eating)
- ridding your body of the extra food (purging)

Purging may include making yourself sick (vomiting), taking laxative or diuretic medicines, avoiding eating for long periods of time, exercising excessively, or a combination of these.

Other signs of bulimia include:

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

You may also notice physical signs like:

- feeling tired (fatigue) and trouble sleeping
- feeling weak or dizzy
- a sore throat from being sick
- bloating or tummy pain
- puffy sides of your face and under your ears from swollen glands
- irregular or stopped periods

See a GP if:

- you think you might have bulimia
- you've been diagnosed with bulimia and treatments are not helping (or speak to

your eating disorder specialist if you have one)

It's important to get help even if you only have some of the signs. Getting help will give you the best chance of recovery.

If you're worried about someone else

Signs of bulimia in someone else can include:

- eating lots of food over a short period of time
- hiding food or eating in secret
- going to the bathroom a lot after eating
- excessively or obsessively exercising

If you're worried about someone else, encourage them to speak to their GP.

How bulimia is diagnosed

If you see a GP about symptoms of bulimia, they'll ask you about your eating habits, how you're feeling and your physical symptoms.

It can be very hard to talk about what you're going through, but getting help gives you the best chance of recovery.

Your GP may ask to weigh you. You can tell your GP if you do not want to know how much you weigh.

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

It may make things easier if you bring someone you trust with you to your appointment.

Treatment for bulimia

Treatment for bulimia takes time, but you can recover. Depending on how long you've had bulimia and how severe it is, treatment can last several months or years.

Your treatment will be tailored to you and include any other support you might need, such as for [depression](#) or [anxiety](#). You may be referred to an eating disorder specialist.

The main treatments are:

- [talking therapies](#) – this usually includes a self-help booklet or online programme which you may do by yourself or with a therapist (your family may also be involved if you're under 18)
- medicines, such as [antidepressants](#), if you have another condition closely linked to bulimia, such as anxiety or depression
- support from a nutrition specialist (dietitian)

You'll usually have appointments at a clinic.

But you may need to stay in hospital if you have serious health problems (such as being very underweight) or doctors are worried you're at risk of [self-harm](#) or [suicide](#).

If you're pregnant, tell your midwife and GP if you have an eating disorder or had one in the past. This will help them offer you the right support during and after pregnancy.

Find out more

- [Treatment for bulimia \(Beat\)](#)

Health risks of bulimia

Bulimia can eventually lead to physical problems associated with not getting the right nutrients, making yourself sick a lot, or overusing laxative medicines.

Sometimes, without the right support, bulimia can be life-threatening.

Possible complications include:

- problems with your teeth – stomach acid can damage tooth enamel if you're being sick a lot
- damage to the lining of your throat – also caused by stomach acid
- [irregular or absent periods](#)
- seizures (fits)
- heart or kidney problems
- bowel problems, including constipation
- bone problems – you may be more likely to develop weakened bones (osteopenia)

Things you can do to help with bulimia

There are some things you can do that can help while you're recovering from bulimia.

Do

- ✓ try not to spend too much time looking in mirrors or checking your body
- ✓ avoid weighing yourself
- ✓ avoid websites or social media that encourage you to lose weight and stay at a very low body weight
- ✓ try to distract yourself after meals if you're worried about purging – it can help to try a new hobby or interest that takes a lot of concentration
- ✓ rinse your mouth with water or a non-acidic mouthwash after vomiting to protect your teeth and make sure you see your dentist regularly
- ✓ talk to people you trust about how you're feeling or find a support group (if you're finding it hard to talk to people, try writing your feelings down instead)

Don't

- ✗ do not drink or eat acidic foods, such as fruit juice, during a binge and after purging

✗ do not smoke, as this increases your risk of gum disease and tooth decay

Help and support for bulimia

If you have bulimia, you can get support from your GP, they are there to listen and help. They'll refer you to an eating disorder specialist or another expert who will also support you with your recovery.

There are also charities and organisations such as Beat and YoungMinds that support people with bulimia and their families.

Online or local support groups

It can be helpful to speak to other people who have bulimia.

There are many people offering support and sharing their stories in support groups, forums and on social media.

- [Local support for eating disorders \(Beat\)](#)
- [Online eating disorders support groups \(Beat\)](#)
- [One-to-one webchat with a Beat helpline advisor \(Beat\)](#)
- [Blogs sharing stories and experiences about living with and recovering from bulimia \(Beat\)](#)

Comments in forums and on social media are often based on personal experience and should not be taken as medical advice.

Support for family, friends and carers

If you care for someone who has bulimia, you can get advice and support from charities.

- [Supporting someone else with an eating disorder \(Beat\)](#)
- [Support for parents of children with a mental health condition \(YoungMinds\)](#)
- [Parents helpline \(YoungMinds\)](#)
- [Services for carers who support someone with an eating disorder \(Beat\)](#)

More information and advice

There are charities that offer advice and information for anyone affected by bulimia.

- [Beat: bulimia](#)
- [YoungMinds: bulimia](#)
- [Mind: eating problems](#)
- [Mental Health Foundation: bulimia](#)

Page last reviewed: 7 November 2024

Next review due: 7 November 2027

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