

Symptoms

Bulimia

— Symptoms

— [Treatment](#)

Bulimia is an eating disorder and mental health condition.

Men and women of any age can be affected by bulimia. But it's most common in young women and can start from the mid teens.

The main signs of bulimia are eating a large amount of food over a very short time.

You then rid your body of the extra food by 1 or more of the following:

- making yourself vomit
- taking laxatives
- excessive exercising
- fasting

Other signs of bulimia include:

- having a fear of putting on weight
- being very critical about your weight and body shape
- feeling very tense or anxious
- thinking about food a lot
- feeling guilty or ashamed, and behaving secretly
- avoiding social activities that involve food
- feeling like you have no control over your eating

You may also notice physical signs like:

- feeling tired
- dramatic changes in weight - up or down
- a sore throat from being sick
- bloating or tummy pain
- a puffy face
- [self-harming](#)

Binge-purge cycle

Bulimia is often a cycle of binge eating and purging. It's triggered by things such as hunger, sadness or stress.

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

Failing to keep to these leads to periods of over eating and loss of control. You then feel guilty or ashamed and purge to get rid of the calories. This leaves you feeling hungry again and the cycle continues.

Complications caused by bulimia

Bulimia can lead to physical problems from not getting the right nutrients.

Complications can include:

- feeling tired and weak
- dental problems
- irregular or absent periods
- dry skin and hair
- brittle fingernails
- swollen glands
- fits and muscle spasms
- heart, kidney or bowel problems, including permanent constipation
- bone problems

Causes of bulimia

The causes of bulimia and other eating disorders are not known.

But 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
- have been criticised for your eating habits, body shape or weight
- are overly concerned with being slim
- have anxiety, low self-esteem, an obsessive personality, or are a perfectionist
- have been sexually abused

Warning signs in someone else

Warning signs that someone you care about has an eating disorder include:

- eating a lot of food very fast, to the point of feeling discomfort
- going to the bathroom a lot after eating, often returning looking flushed
- obsessive exercising
- eating alone and hoarding food

Getting help

Get help and support as soon as possible. This will give you the best chance of recovering from bulimia. If you think you may have bulimia, talk to your GP.

If you are concerned that a family member or friend may have bulimia, encourage them to see their GP. You could offer to go along with them.

[Visit bodywhys.ie](https://bodywhys.ie) for support and information about bulimia

Content supplied by the [NHS](https://www.nhs.uk) and adapted for Ireland by the HSE

Page last reviewed: 1 September 2022

Next review due: 1 September 2025

HSE Live - we're here to help

Monday to Friday: 8am to 8pm

Saturday: 9am to 5pm

Sunday: Closed

Bank holidays: Closed

Freephone: [1800 700 700](tel:1800700700)

From outside Ireland: [00 353 1 240 8787](tel:0035312408787)

[HSE Facebook](#)

[HSE Instagram](#)

[HSE TikTok](#)

[HSE YouTube](#)

[HSE LinkedIn](#)

[HSE X \(Twitter\)](#)

[Complaints and feedback](#)

[Emergencies](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Cookie statement](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy statement](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

© Health Service Executive