

## What is Bulimia Nervosa?

**Bulimia Nervosa is a serious, potentially life threatening mental illness.**

### 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)

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 can go to great lengths to keep their eating and exercise habits secret. As a result, Bulimia can often go undetected for a long period of time.

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

### What are the warning signs of Bulimia?

Having awareness about Bulimia 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.

A person with Bulimia has not made a “lifestyle choice”, they are actually very unwell and need help.

The reasons for developing Bulimia will differ from person to person; known causes include genetic predisposition and a combination of environmental, social and cultural factors.

Bulimia is characterised by repeated episodes of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviours. In addition, people with Bulimia place an excessive emphasis on body shape or weight in their self-evaluation. This can lead to the person’s sense of self-esteem and self worth being wholly defined by the way they look.

### What are compensatory behaviours?

Compensatory behaviours are used as a way of trying to control weight after binge eating episodes. 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

A person with Bulimia can become lost in a dangerous cycle of eating out of control and attempts to compensate which can lead to feelings of shame, guilt



The warning signs of Bulimia can be physical, psychological and behavioural. It is possible for someone with Bulimia 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
- Obsession with food and need for control
- Depression, anxiety or irritability
- Extreme body dissatisfaction

## Behavioural Signs:

- Evidence of binge eating
- 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
- Secretive behaviour around food
- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Dieting behaviour
- Frequent trips to the bathroom during or shortly after meals which could be evidence of vomiting or laxative use
- Erratic behaviour
- Self harm, substance abuse or suicide attempts

## What are the risks associated with Bulimia?

The risks associated with Bulimia are severe. People with Bulimia 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

## Is it possible to recover?

**Yes.** It is possible to recover from Bulimia, even if you have been living with the illness for many years. The path to recovery can be very challenging. People with Bulimia 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 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, 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](http://www.nedc.com.au/helplines)