

## 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)

## What is Binge Eating Disorder?

**Body image is the perception that a person has of their physical self and the thoughts and feelings that result from that perception.**

A person with Binge Eating Disorder will not use compensatory behaviours, such as self-induced vomiting or over-exercising after binge eating.

Many people with Binge Eating Disorder are overweight or obese.

## 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)

The reasons for developing Binge Eating Disorder will differ from person to person; known causes include genetic predisposition and a combination of environmental, social and cultural factors. Binge Eating Disorder can occur in people of all ages and genders, across all socioeconomic groups, and from any cultural background. Large population studies suggest that equal numbers of males and females experience Binge Eating Disorder.

## Defining Binge Eating Disorder

### Frequent episodes of binge eating

A person with Binge Eating Disorder 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.

### Eating habits

A person with Binge Eating Disorder will often have a range of identifiable eating habits. These can include eating very quickly, eating when they are not physically hungry and continuing to eat even when they are full, to the point that they feel uncomfortable.

### Feelings around food

Feelings of guilt and shame are highly prevalent in people with Binge Eating Disorder. People with Binge Eating Disorder often feel guilty or ashamed about the amount, and the way they eat during a binge eating episode. Binge eating often occurs at times of stress, anger, boredom or distress. At such times, binge eating is used as a way to cope with challenging emotions.

### Behaviours around food

Because of their feelings around food, people with Binge Eating Disorder are often very secretive about their eating habits and choose to eat alone.

## What are the warning signs of Binge Eating Disorder?

Having awareness about Binge Eating Disorder 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 Binge Eating Disorder can be physical, psychological and behavioural. It is possible for someone with Binge Eating Disorder to display a combination of these symptoms.

## Physical signs:

- Feeling tired and not sleeping well
- Feeling bloated, constipated or developing intolerances to food

## Psychological Signs:

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and weight
- Extreme body dissatisfaction and shame about their appearance
- Feelings of extreme distress, sadness, anxiety and guilt during and after a binge episode
- Low self esteem
- Increased sensitivity to comments relating to food, weight, body shape, exercise
- Depression, anxiety or irritability

## Behavioural Signs:

- Evidence of binge eating (e.g. disappearance or hoarding of food)
- Secretive behaviour relating to food (e.g. hiding food and food wrappers around the house)
- Evading questions about eating and weight
- Increased isolation and withdrawal from activities previously enjoyed
- Erratic behaviour (e.g. shoplifting food or spending large amounts of money on food)
- Self harm, substance abuse or suicide attempts

## What are the risks associated with Binge Eating Disorder?

The risks associated with Binge Eating Disorder are severe. People with Binge Eating Disorder may experience:

- Osteoarthritis - a painful form of degenerative arthritis in which a person's joints degrade in quality and can lead to loss of cartilage
- Chronic kidney problems or kidney failure
- High blood pressure and/or high cholesterol leading to increased risk of stroke, diabetes and heart disease

## Is recovery possible?

**Yes.** It is possible to recover from Binge Eating Disorder, even if you have been living with the illness for many years.

The path to recovery can be very challenging but it can also shed light on what contributes to binge eating, low self-esteem and negative body image, and how to minimise relapse. Through the process of recovery a person with Binge Eating Disorder can learn how to replace their unhealthy eating habits with more helpful coping strategies.

## Getting help

If you suspect that you or someone you know has Binge Eating Disorder, 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.

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## What is Anorexia Nervosa?

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

bid to achieve a culturally constructed thin ideal whereas men may over exercise and control their diet to achieve a muscular body.

It is commonly accepted that Anorexia is more frequently diagnosed in females across the ages. However, a recent population study has suggested that in adolescents, there are an equal number of males and females suffering from this illness.

A person with Anorexia has not made a 'lifestyle choice', they are actually very unwell and need help.

The reasons behind the development of Anorexia will differ from person to person; known causes include genetic predisposition and a combination of environmental, social and cultural factors.

For some people, restricting their food and weight can be a way of controlling areas of life that feel out of their control and their body image can come to define their entire sense of self worth. It can also be a way of expressing emotions that may feel too complex or frightening such as pain, stress or anxiety.

Restrictive dieting and excessive exercise can be contributing factors to the onset of Anorexia. Women and girls with Anorexia may use dieting behaviour in a

### Defining Anorexia:

#### Restricted energy intake

A person with Anorexia is unable to maintain what is considered to be a normal and healthy weight. They could also have lost a considerable amount of weight in a short period of time.

#### A fear of gaining weight

Even when people with Anorexia are underweight, starved or malnourished they still possess an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming overweight.

#### Disturbed body image

When someone has Anorexia the amount of attention they place on their body image can be enormous. The person's self worth can become entirely defined by the way they think they look. A person with Anorexia can also develop a distorted view of their body. They may see themselves as overweight when in reality they are dangerously underweight. Frequently there is a preoccupation with certain body parts, particularly the abdomen, buttocks and thighs.

### Sub-Types of Anorexia

#### Restricting Subtype

People with this subtype place severe restrictions on the amount and type of food they consume. This can manifest in different ways including some or all of the following:

- Restricting certain food groups
- Counting calories
- Skipping meals
- Obsessive rules and rigid thinking

#### Binge Eating/Purging Subtype

People with this subtype also place severe restriction on the amount and type of food they consume. In addition to this the person will display purging behaviour and may also engage in binge eating. Binge eating involves eating a large amount of food and feeling a 'loss of control'. Purging behaviour involves self induced vomiting, or deliberately misusing laxatives, diuretics or enemas to compensate for eating food.



## What are the warning signs of Anorexia?

Having awareness about Anorexia and its signs and symptoms can make a huge difference to the duration and severity 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.

Someone with Anorexia may display any combination of the following warning signs.

### Physical signs:

- Rapid weight loss or frequent weight changes
- Loss or disturbance of menstruation in girls and women and decreased libido in men
- Fainting or dizziness
- Feeling cold most of the time, even in warm weather
- Feeling bloated, constipated, or the development of intolerances to food
- Feeling tired and not sleeping well
- Lethargy and low energy
- Facial changes
- Fine hair appearing on face and body

### Psychological signs:

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and weight
- Feeling anxious and/or irritable around meal times
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- Unable to maintain a normal body weight for their age and height
- Depression and anxiety
- Reduced capacity for thinking and increased difficulty concentrating

- 'Black and white' thinking
- Having a distorted body image
- Low self esteem and perfectionism
- Increased sensitivity to comments relating to food, weight, body shape, exercise
- Extreme body image dissatisfaction

### Behavioural signs:

- Dieting behaviour
- Deliberate misuse of laxatives, appetite suppressants, enemas and diuretics
- Repetitive or obsessive behaviours relating to body shape and weight
- Evidence of binge eating
- Eating in private and avoiding meals with other people
- Anti-social behaviour
- Secrecy around eating
- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Radical changes in food preferences
- Obsessive rituals around food preparation and eating
- Preoccupation with preparing food for others, recipes and nutrition
- Self harm, substance abuse or suicide attempts

## What are the risks associated with Anorexia?

The risks associated with Anorexia are severe and can be life threatening. They include:

- Anaemia
- Compromised immune system
- Intestinal problems
- Loss or disturbance of menstruation in girls and women
- Increased risk of infertility in men and women
- Kidney failure
- Osteoporosis– a condition that leads to bones becoming fragile and easily fractured
- Heart problems
- Death

## Is recovery from Anorexia possible?

**Yes.** It is possible to recover from Anorexia, even if you have been living with the illness for many years. The path to recovery can be long and challenging, however with the right team supporting you and a high level of commitment, recovery is achievable. Treatment for Anorexia is available; seek help from a professional with specialised knowledge in eating disorders.

## Getting help

If you suspect that you or someone you know has Anorexia, 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' and can refer you to a practitioner with specialised knowledge in health, nutrition and eating disorders.

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The National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC) is an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Health

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