Dangers of bulimia [1]

Dear Alice,

I am bulimic and I would like to know exactly what harmful things this does to your body. Can you die from it? Can you actually be cured?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Bulimia is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition. There are multiple dangerous health consequences that result from being bulimic, both physical and psychological. Because it's so intimately entwined with self-image?it's not just about food?bulimia can be difficult to overcome. Bulimia can take a huge toll on a person's health, and rob her or him of the ability to enjoy life to the fullest. However, treatment can help and has helped many people with bulimia feel better about themselves and adopt healthier eating patterns.

Often, those with bulimia will eat very large amounts of food rapidly and in secret. They also typically report a lack of feeling in control of these behaviors. Following these binges, they often feel guilty, ashamed, and out of control. As a result, they engage in compensatory behaviors such as vomiting, over-exercising, abusing laxatives, diuretics, or enemas, and/or not eating for several days. These practices may take place daily or weekly and go on for years.

Bulimia can lead to a number of serious and even life-threatening complications. The type of complications someone experiences is often related to their choice of purging method. Bulimia can cause:

- **Cardiovascular problems.** Electrolyte imbalances due to vomiting can lead to heart muscle disorders and irregular heart rhythms. These can be life-threatening. Fainting and low blood pressures are also common issues.
- **Tooth and gum problems.** Repeated vomiting washes up an excess of stomach acid over teeth and gums, which can cause a significant and permanent loss of dental enamel. Teeth may become ragged and chipped, and dental cavities may increase.
- **Throat and mouth problems.** Frequent or regular vomiting can cause sores in your mouth or throat due to stomach acid irritation.
- **Low potassium levels.** The purging process tends to dehydrate your body and lower the level of potassium in your blood. This can cause weakness and irregular heart rhythms.
**Digestive problems.** Purging by vomiting or use of laxatives may irritate the walls of your esophagus and rectum. In severe cases, your esophagus can rupture, leading to life-threatening bleeding. Repeated purging may also cause constipation. Laxative abuse can lead to dependence. Gastrointestinal bleeding also may occur.

**Abuse of medications and drugs.** The variety of over-the-counter drugs you may use during purge cycles may cause a drug problem. Bulimia is also associated with higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse.

**Psychological problems.** Bulimia is often associated with depression, anxiety, and/or low self-esteem. People with bulimia may have trouble controlling impulsive behaviors, managing their moods or expressing anger.

Although the road to recovery may be challenging, people can be cured of bulimia. Treatment methods vary, including professional counseling, establishing regular eating patterns, learning alternative coping strategies for stressful or lonely times, and/or taking antidepressant medication. You can find more information about eating disorders and treatments at The National Eating Disorders Association [2]. You can change this self-destructive pattern, with commitment and help.

Alice!
Category:
**Nutrition & Physical Activity** [3]
**Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders** [4]

**Related questions**

What to eat? [5]
Eating disorders vs. non-disordered eating [6]
Struggling with low self-esteem [7]
Effects of chewing and spitting food [8]
Partner is bulimic? What can I do to help her and myself? [9]

**Resources**

Medical Services (Morningside) [10]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUMC) [12]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [13]
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