

# Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

# What Is Bulimia?



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## Description

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Many people go through periods where they eat more or less than usual. If these episodes are extreme, distressing, or happen often, they may be a sign of bulimia nervosa. Bulimia is a type of eating disorder where you have episodes of binge-eating (eating large amounts of food in an uncontrolled way) and compensation (doing things to prevent weight gain such as vomiting or using laxatives). At some point in their lives, about 3 in every 100 women and 1 in every 100 men develop bulimia (van Eeden et al., 2021). Fortunately, psychological treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) are very effective in overcoming bulimia.

The *What Is Bulimia?* information handout is designed to help clients with bulimia nervosa understand more about their condition. It includes:

- A summary of the most common symptoms of bulimia.
- Descriptions of what it can feel like to have bulimia.
- A description of why bulimia might not get better by itself, derived from the Fairburn, Cooper & Shafran (2003) transdiagnostic cognitive model of eating disorders.
- A brief overview of evidence-based psychological treatments for bulimia.

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## Instructions

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Our 'What Is ...?' series is designed to support your clients:

- **Reassure and encourage optimism.** Many clients find it hugely reassuring to know there is a name for what they are experiencing, and that there are evidence-based psychological models and treatments specifically designed to help.
- **Scaffold knowledge.** The handouts are perfect during early stages of therapy to help your clients understand how their symptoms fit together and make sense.
- **Signposting.** If you're just seeing a client briefly for assessment, or you have a curious client who wants to know more, these resources can be a helpful part of guiding them to the right service.

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## References

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# What Is Bulimia?

You have episodes of binge-eating: your eating feels out-of-control and excessive.

You use compensatory behaviors to avoid gaining weight, such as vomiting, food restriction, heavy exercise, or taking diet pills.

You worry about your weight, what you eat, or how your body looks to the extent that it gets in the way of your life.

You keep checking your weight or your body, or you avoid looking at yourself.

Many people go through periods where they eat more or less than usual. If these episodes are extreme, distressing, or happen often, they may be a sign of bulimia nervosa.

Bulimia is a type of eating disorder where you have episodes of binge-eating and compensatory behaviors. At some point in their lives, about 3 in every 100 women and 1 in every 100 men develop bulimia. Fortunately, psychological treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) are very effective in overcoming bulimia.

## The core of bulimia: extreme beliefs about your shape, weight, and eating

People with bulimia are very concerned about how much they weigh, the way their body looks, and their food intake. These concerns often take the form of extreme, 'overvalued' beliefs that emphasize the importance of controlling their shape, weight, and eating.

I'm only attractive if I look thin.



I must be a certain weight to be acceptable.



If I ate more, no-one would like me.



## Bulimia can keep itself going in these ways:

### All or nothing patterns of eating

Extreme beliefs lead to attempts to control your weight, such as intense dieting. Often, this results in undereating: your body doesn't get the energy it needs, so you experience hunger, cravings, and other biological pressures to eat. This 'hunger pressure' builds up over time and eventually leads to binge-eating. Afterwards, you might want to restrict, but this makes you more likely to fall into a cycle of undereating and bingeing in future.

### Purging and other weight-control strategies

Binge-eating can lead to fears about changes in your weight, so you might use weight-control behaviors to prevent this (such as vomiting, laxatives, or exercise). Sometimes, these behaviors can become a way of justifying binge-eating ("I'll binge now because I know I can compensate later"). These weight control behaviors can also deplete your energy levels and intensify hunger and cravings, which also increases the risk of more binge-eating.

### Using food to manage distress

Not meeting the weight, body shape, and food-related expectations you set yourself can be upsetting. Other issues might also add to your distress, like relationship problems or low self-esteem. Sometimes, you might manage these difficult feelings by binge-purging. However, this doesn't address what causes these emotions and stops you from coping in other ways. Long-term, bulimia leaves you feeling worse, which leads to more binges.

## Treatment for bulimia

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for bulimia. CBT can help you feel more in control of your eating, tackle the things that contribute to your eating disorder (e.g., difficult feelings about yourself, your body, or relationships), and build a happier life for yourself.

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