

Facts you should know about: The Physical Consequences of Bulimia Nervosa

(1) Bingeing

- Bingeing causes bloating and abdominal discomfort.
- It may lead to more general digestive problems, including stomach cramps, wind, constipation and diarrhoea.
- If the distended stomach presses against the diaphragm it may also cause difficulty with breathing.
- In rare cases, the stomach wall can become so stretched that it tears. This is a serious medical emergency.

(2) Self-induced vomiting

Teeth

- Vomiting exposes teeth to acid from the stomach which will erode dental enamel and rot the teeth.
- The damage to teeth is irreversible, although it will cease once vomiting stops.
- Repeated vomiting also causes bad breath.

Face

- With repeated vomiting the glands around the mouth that produce saliva can swell gradually.
- The swelling is painless but the face may take on a round, chubby appearance.
- This is reversible and will gradually diminish as eating habits improve.

Throat

- Inducing vomiting may result in injuries to the back of the throat, which can then get infected.
- Recurrent sore throats, blistering as well as mouth ulcers and hoarseness are common in those who induce vomiting.

Stomach

- Although rare, violent vomiting can lead to tearing and bleeding of the wall of the oesophagus, the tube leading from the mouth to the stomach.
- This is also a medical emergency. Vomiting repeatedly over several years can also weaken the oesophageal sphincter, the set of muscles at the top of the stomach.
- If this happens the contents of the stomach may come up spontaneously into the mouth, a distressing, uncomfortable and embarrassing experience.

Fingers

- If fingers are used to stimulate vomiting then damage may occur to the knuckles of the hand used.
- Abrasions may appear, then scars will form.

Electrolytes

- Body fluids and electrolytes (chemicals, such as sodium and potassium capable of conducting electricity that are responsible for normal cell functioning) can also be disturbed in a number of different ways by vomiting; some of them are very serious.
- The most concerning is a low potassium level (hypokalaemia) which can result in heartbeat irregularities.

- Symptoms include extreme thirst, dizziness, fluid retention (swelling of legs and arms), weakness and lethargy, muscle twitches and spasms.
- The effects are reversible and disappear once vomiting stops.

(3) Laxatives and diuretics

- Taking laxatives and diuretics can also lead to electrolyte disturbances.
- People taking either or both, in addition to vomiting regularly, are particularly at risk.
- Stopping them suddenly may lead to rebound water retention and thus a temporary increase in weight.
- The effects of laxatives are usually reversible but if taken in large doses over long periods of time, can cause permanent damage to the gut wall.
- In large quantities they can also cause nausea and spontaneous vomiting.
- Tolerance to laxatives develops quite quickly, so more and more are needed to achieve the same effect.
- This increases the risk of self-poisoning and serious electrolyte disturbance.

(4) Dieting

- Weight cycling or 'yo-yo' dieting is associated with increased mortality, especially death from cardiovascular disease.
- Dieting, with or without weight loss, can also affect hormones, resulting in irregular or absent menstruation.
- It can also disturb some of the physiological mechanisms that control eating, for example, diets that limit or avoid carbohydrates fail to take advantage of carbohydrates' natural ability to suppress appetite.
- Serotonin, a chemical neurotransmitter in the brain, which is thought to play a role in normal eating and in food selection, can also be affected by dieting and may increase the risk of developing an eating disorder.

(5) Exercise

- Excessive exercise can lead to injury and, not infrequently, a compulsion to exercise may mean that injuries are not given adequate time and rest to heal.

Other problems

Osteoporosis

- Although research is limited, preliminary findings suggest that bulimia nervosa may be associated with osteoporosis.
- Osteoporosis, or loss of bone density, puts people at risk of stress fractures in later life.
- It is particularly likely to be a problem in those who have reached a very low weight, whose periods have stopped for a long while because of their eating problem, or who have a history of anorexia nervosa.
- Dieting (see below) in itself can also affect bone density if the diet chosen is deficient in calcium (this is particularly important before age 30 or so), and may contribute to osteoporosis.

Effects on Fertility and Pregnancy

- Dieting and weight loss can impair fertility, although the effects are generally reversible.
- Little is known about the effect of bingeing on fertility and pregnancy.
- The use of vomiting, laxatives and diuretics is more likely to be harmful.
- Some pregnant women with bulimia nervosa may be at risk of giving birth to underweight babies.
- Preliminary work also suggests that the miscarriage rate may be higher than normal for women with bulimia nervosa.