

## Problem Solvers 25 Bulimia in Dentistry

Synonyms: Anorexia, Bulimia, Binge and Purge, throwing up and your teeth.

The disease known as bulimia is characterized by binge eating and vomiting and is part of a larger disorder called Bulimia Nervosa. Anorexia and Bulimia are both eating disorders that affect primarily adolescent girls and the diseases can be difficult to differentiate from each other. Bulimia can have serious ramifications for your teeth. This article will give you some information on treating this very devastating disease.

Anorexia is often mentioned with Bulimia, what is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia Nervosa is an eating disorder when a person's weight and desire to become thinner is secondary to fears relating to a person's body image. They can attempt to control weight by exercising obsessively, resorting to diet pills, starvation and unhealthy eating to the point of obsession and addiction. This is a devastating disease but is different than Bulimia, which is characterized and diagnosed differently.

What is Bulimia and how is it diagnosed?

Bulimia is an eating disorder that is characterized by binge eating and compensatory habits to make sure this food is not utilized resulting in weight gain.

For someone to be diagnosed with Bulimia there must be recurrent episodes of binge eating where large amounts of food are eaten in a short period of time. People that are bingeing are said to have little emotional control over this action. Then compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain are performed by the patient. These may include misuse of laxatives, self-induced vomiting, diuretics, fasting, excessive exercise or the inappropriate use of medications to prevent weight gain. If this behavior occurs at least two times a week for three months it can be diagnosed as bulimia.

What should I do if I have these symptoms?

You have taken the first step toward your care if you recognize you have these symptoms! You should see your physician or go to a walk-in clinic where you can be directed to a clinician, psychologist, psychiatrist or therapist that specializes in this disorder. You will undergo diagnosis, treatment and ongoing therapy and support to help reestablish normal eating patterns and stabilize your situation.

Facts:

According to the South Carolina Department of Mental Health it is estimated that one in 200 American women suffer from anorexia with two to three in 100 having bulimia. Over 8 million Americans have an eating disorder. Of all the mental illnesses eating disorders have the highest mortality rate.

It is staggering to realize that 5-10% of anorexics die within 10 years after contracting the disease and 20% may be dead after 20 years. Most people don't realize the severity of the disease and only 1 in 10 people ever receive treatment for this life-threatening problem.

What you should know:

- 95% of people are between the ages of 12 and 25
- 50% of girls between 11 and 13 see themselves as heavy and overweight
- 80% of girls that are 13 have tried to diet.
- Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

25% of college-aged women binge and purge to control their weight. Bulimia nervosa and anorexia are similar in that both disorders revolve around fears these people have of becoming obese. They are preoccupied with their appearance; their weight, and they are driven to become thinner. These people may have emotional problems with tendencies toward perfectionism; depression, anxiety and they may have obsessive-compulsive personalities.

Women with bulimia are generally more concerned about what others think of them. They are generally more sexually experienced and they may have fewer obsessive tendencies than people with anorexia. Once you have been diagnosed and undergone treatment it is time to address any damage that may have occurred to your teeth and gums so that these areas can be restored.

What does bingeing do to my teeth?

The biggest problem from people that binge and purge is the effects it has on their teeth. The vomiting and purging that bulimics do to lose weight will bathe their teeth in hydrochloric acid. This can thin the enamel or erode it completely.

Eventually loss of enamel will lead to chipping, cracking and loss of teeth as well as exposure of the nerve under the enamel. The severe wear and chemical corrosion together with grinding and biting can lead to loss of tooth structure and super-eruption of the opposing teeth. So even when there is a desire to fix these teeth, the loss of space for an adequately sized tooth can be very difficult to achieve.

I have sensitive teeth is this normal?

Yes the loss of enamel exposes the underlying dentin and the dentin has pores which house nerve endings that lead to the main nerve inside the tooth.

What can I do for the sensitivity?

You may try desensitizing toothpastes, prescription fluoride or you may need stronger medicines your dentist can apply to seal the dentinal tubules that have been exposed.

I had the medicine put on and still have pain, what's next?

You may need to have the nerve removed (root canal therapy) from one or more teeth to remove all the feeling within the tooth.

What are my options to restore my thin teeth?

If it is caught early enough, some bonding or tooth colored fillings can be done. If the opposing tooth has moved it may require some gentle reshaping.

I can see through my teeth and they are really thin, I am scared, what can I do?

When severe attrition or wear has occurred it may be necessary to crown several teeth. A crown would restore the lost tooth structure and help restore your bite to normal.

My dentist told me I didn't have space to put on crowns, what can I do?

When tooth wear is extensive and teeth move up into the worn out areas, it may be necessary to have braces to move the opposing teeth back where they belong so there can be space to restore the worn down teeth. Other times there can be adjustment to the enamel of the remaining teeth to create the space needed for crowns.

Doing braces and crowns can be thousands or tens of thousands of dollars. I can't afford this. What else can I do?

Some repair may be possible and plastic mouthguards called bruxism appliances should be made so that further wear can happen to the mouthguard instead of your thinned, chipped teeth. It is true that fixing the damage from Bulimia can be very expensive and there are often financial arrangements that can be made to spread out the payment with minimal or no interest.

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