

Watch Out for Bulimia



A life-threatening eating disorder, bulimia nervosa also has serious consequences for oral health.

Protect your teen by knowing the signs of this illness and working with your child's dentist to identify it early on.

What is it?

People with bulimia are preoccupied with food and their weight. The disorder is characterized by:

Bingeing: Eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time.

Purging: Getting rid of the food rapidly through the use of exercise, laxatives or, most commonly, vomiting.

Effects on teeth

Tooth erosion: Stomach acid from vomiting wears down enamel, leaving teeth brittle, glassy or yellow.

Tooth sensitivity: When enamel is damaged, teeth can be especially sensitive to hot and cold foods and drinks.

Effects on oral health

Dry mouth: Using laxatives and other medication to purge can dry out the mouth, leaving teeth and gums more susceptible to bacteria. Frequent vomiting can also damage the salivary glands that produce saliva.

Gum disease and decay: Both the lack of saliva and presence of stomach acid encourage cavities and gum disease.

Tissue damage: Sores in the mouth and throat are a common result of frequent vomiting. Other signs include cracked lips, a red and irritated throat and enlarged salivary glands.

Be proactive

Make sure your child receives regular dental checkups. Your dentist may be able to:

- Detect enamel erosion due to bulimia during oral exams
- Offer harm-reduction strategies
- Recommend a therapist who specializes in eating disorders

Get help

Recovery from an eating disorder can be difficult and painful. Turn to a professional for treatment and support.

Recognize the signs

Here are some common oral problems associated with bulimia:

- Bad breath or dry mouth
- Sensitive teeth
- Teeth that are worn, eroded or appear almost translucent
- Tender mouth, throat and salivary glands
- Mouth sores, cracked lips or bleeding gums

Did you know that an estimated 1.5% of women have bulimia nervosa in their lifetime?¹

¹ Hudson et al. The prevalence and correlates of eating disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Biol Psychiatry*. 2007;61(3):348-58.