

The physical effects of bulimia

The cycle of binge-eating followed by purging, or vomiting, has a range of harmful and effects on the body. These effects commonly include:

- Frequent and major weight changes
- Stretch marks
- Sore throat, the erosion of tooth enamel and bad breath caused by excessive vomiting
- Swollen salivary glands making the face round and puffy
- Poor skin condition and possible hair loss
- Irregular menstrual periods or loss of periods
- Lethargy and tiredness
- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Chronic constipation and risk of bowel problems due to laxative abuse

There is a general tendency among people with bulimia to gain weight year-on-year. People use vomiting for weight loss followed by binge eating leading to significant weight gain. Not all of this weight is lost in the next cycle of vomiting.

Therefore a drive to lose weight turns into a cycle which actually causes weight increase.

The long term dangers of bulimia

Many people with bulimia develop chronic dehydration, caused by vomiting and the use of laxatives. This can lead to low potassium levels, triggering a wide range of symptoms ranging from lethargy and muddled thinking to potentially life-threatening heart and kidney problems. Another serious complication of bulimia is the rupture of the stomach.

Bulimia has a lower mortality rate than anorexia. However, in extreme cases, death can occur due to heart failure. People with bulimia have also died following unintentional overdoses.

Where can I find out more?

Go to www.newbridge-health.org.uk/information for more information.

The physical effects of anorexia

Anorexia and heart problems

Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of all forms of mental illness, with rates of between 10 and 15 per cent. A significant proportion of these deaths are due to heart failure as a result of long term, severe anorexia.

When anorexia has become this severe, the heart is often damaged. There not enough body fat to protect the heart, anaemia, which weakens the blood, can develop and there is commonly poor circulation. This means that the heart is not able to pump and circulate blood effectively.

Severe anorexia results in the loss of muscle mass, including heart muscle. Consequently, the muscles of the heart can physically weaken, there can be an overall drop in blood pressure and pulse can contribute to slower breathing rates.

Studies have shown that the majority of people with anorexia who are admitted to hospital have low heart rates. Common heart problems include arrhythmias (fast, slow or irregular heart beat), bradycardia (slow heart beat) and hypotension (low blood pressure).

Anorexia and neurological (brain) problems

People with severe anorexia may suffer nerve damage that affects the brain and other parts of the body. This can lead to nerve affected conditions including the development of seizures, confused thinking and extreme irritability and numbness or odd nerve sensations in the hands or feet (peripheral neuropathy).

Brain scans show that parts of the brain can undergo structural changes and abnormal activity during anorexic states. Some of these changes return to normal after weight gain, but there is evidence that some damage may be permanent.

Anorexia and anaemia (or blood problems)

Anaemia is a common result of anorexia and starvation. In one study, 38 per cent of anorexic participants had anemia. A particularly serious blood problem is pernicious anaemia, which can be caused by severely low levels of vitamin B12. If anorexia becomes extreme, the bone marrow dramatically reduces its production of blood cells, a life-threatening condition called pancytopenia.

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