

# The Health Impact of Purging

## Before Getting Started...

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions with your nutritionist:

- What do you know about purging?
- How do you think purging could affect your body long-term?

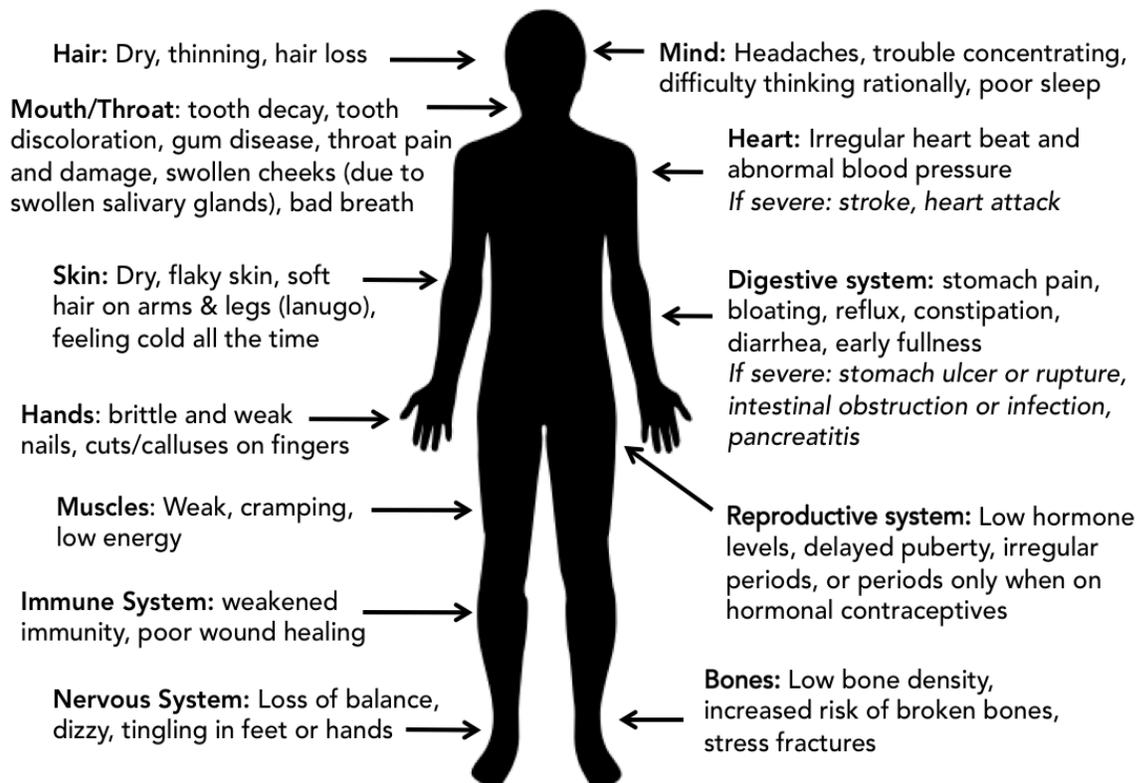
## Purging and Eating Disorders

Purging is one unhealthy behavior that can be a symptom of an eating disorder. Generally speaking, an eating disorder causes someone to have extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors around food, exercise, and/or body image. Research shows people with eating disorders actually have chemical changes in their brain that impact the way they think about food, nutrition, and their bodies.<sup>1</sup>



## The Facts on Purging:

The word “purge” means ‘to get rid of.’ In the context of eating disorders, purging refers to behaviors that rid the body of energy and nutrients. These behaviors include self-induced vomiting and misusing laxatives, diuretics, enemas or other medications. Electrolyte and fluid imbalances and digestive system damage caused by different methods of purging can harm many of the body’s systems and organs.<sup>2</sup>



Fortunately, many of the health problems listed on the previous page can be reversed when someone stops purging and participates in eating disorder treatment.

### **Questions For You:**

- Which of the symptoms listed on the previous page have you experienced?
- Why do you think purging could cause these symptoms?

Since we live in a culture where dieting and weight loss are common topics of conversation, it can be hard to know whether eating and exercise habits are healthy or disordered. Below is an overview of some behaviors that may indicate an eating disorder.

### **Signs and Symptoms of an Eating Disorder:**

(Adapted from the National Eating Disorder Association)

- Being preoccupied with thoughts about food or calories, fear of being “fat” or gaining weight, and denial of seriousness of significant weight changes
- All-or-nothing thinking, strong need for control over food or exercise choices
- Feeling uncomfortable eating around others, making excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations involving food, cooking meals for others without eating
- Trying to stay within a certain number of calories or cutting out entire food groups (ex. starches and grains, high-fat foods, dairy, meat, etc.)
- Skipping meals, fasting, dieting, or grazing throughout the day without planned meals
- Using excessive amounts of gum, diet foods, water, or other non-caloric drinks to suppress appetite and hunger
- Feeling the need to “burn off” calories by exercising, vomiting, or using laxatives or diuretics due to feeling disgusted or guilty after eating certain foods (also called purging)
- Maintaining a rigid exercise routine despite weather, muscle weakness, illness, or injury
- Eating an amount of food that is much larger than most people would eat under similar circumstances, feeling out of control around food, and eating to the point of feeling uncomfortably full (also called binge eating)
- Eating alone out of embarrassment at the type or quantity of food being eaten
- Withdrawing from friends and activities and planning a schedule to make time for bingeing and/or purging sessions
- Developing food behaviors to avoid or restrict eating (ex. excessive chewing, taking small bites, rearranging food on plate, using condiments excessively or in an unusual way)
- Checking ingredient lists and nutrition labels compulsively, spending a lot of time reading about nutrition or looking at food or recipes on social media
- Being unable to maintain a weight appropriate for age, height, and body frame
- Dressing in layers or baggy clothes to stay warm or hide weight loss

In contrast, normal and healthy eating is on the other end of the spectrum. While this can look different for everyone, some principles of normal, healthy eating are outlined below.

### **Principles of Normal, Healthy Eating:**

- Eating when you're hungry and stopping when you're full and satisfied
- Being flexible with food choices depending on your schedule, mood, and social events
- Making food choices based on what your body needs and what you enjoy eating
- Trusting your body's ability to regulate your energy needs and weight by listening to your internal hunger and fullness cues
- Spending some time thinking about food, nutrition, and your body but not being so focused that these thoughts distract you from your interests and relationships

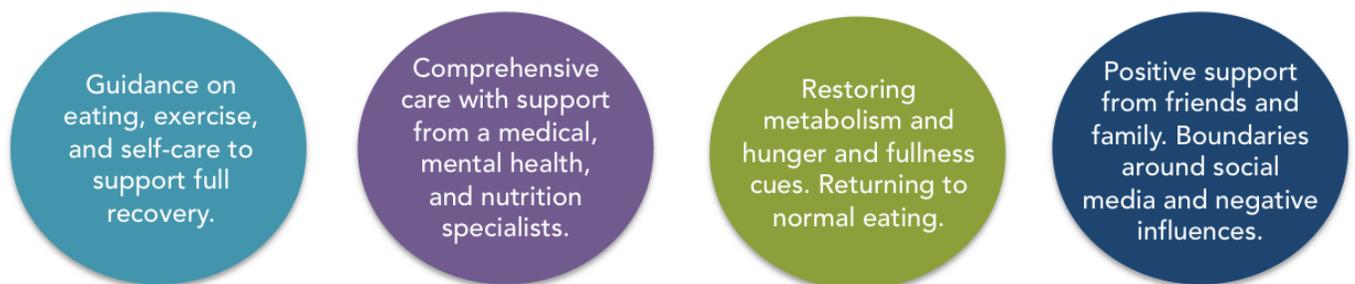
Disordered eating is the gray area between healthy eating and an eating disorder, where someone may not identify completely with normal and healthy eating principles or with symptoms of an eating disorder. Since disordered eating can increase someone's risk of developing an eating disorder, teens who suspect they may have disordered eating should share this with their health care provider or a dietitian.

### What Causes an Eating Disorder?

While there is no single cause of an eating disorder or purging specifically, some life events, personality traits, and mental health concerns can increase risk of purging<sup>3</sup>:

- **Impulsivity:** acting on immediate urges when experiencing negative emotions
- **Perfectionism:** striving for perfection in different areas of life
- **Emotional distress:** difficulty identifying and experiencing different emotions
- **Negative body image:** having negative thoughts or feelings about your appearance
- **Depression and self-harm behaviors:** feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or worthless
- **Anxiety:** feeling uneasy, worried, or restless in situations that are not dangerous

### How Do You Treat an Eating Disorder?



The sooner you start working with a comprehensive care team to address your eating disorder behaviors, the easier it is to treat and fully recover.

## What Does This Mean For Me?

1. Which health effects of purging are most concerning to you?
2. Where do you think you fall on the spectrum of eating behaviors?
3. What are some ways you would be comfortable making changes to your eating?
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## To Learn More:

National Eating Disorders Association: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/)

Center For Young Women's Health: [youngwomenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/](http://youngwomenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/)

Center For Young Men's Health: [youngmenshealthsite.org/nutrition-fitness-index/](http://youngmenshealthsite.org/nutrition-fitness-index/)

Lock J, Le Grange D. *Helping Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder* (2015).

## References:

1. Avena, Nicole M., and Miriam E. Bocarsly. "Dysregulation of brain reward systems in eating disorders: neurochemical information from animal models of binge eating, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa." *Neuropharmacology* 63.1 (2012): 87-96.
2. Sachs, Katherine, and Philip S. Mehler. "Medical complications of bulimia nervosa and their treatments." *Eating and Weight Disorders-Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity* 21.1 (2016): 13-18.
3. Pearson, Carolyn M., Stephen A. Wonderlich, and Gregory T. Smith. "A risk and maintenance model for bulimia nervosa: From impulsive action to compulsive behavior." *Psychological Review* 122.3 (2015): 516.