

Live Well to
Learn Well

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information

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This information is for you if:

- You have ever made yourself vomit
- You've thought about, or tried, to make yourself vomit
- Making yourself vomit has become a habit
- You have friends or relatives who make themselves vomit and you want to help

Why do people purge?

It's more complex than you might think, and is often not a simple behavior that is easy to stop.

- Some people make themselves vomit after eating.
- People may experience emotional and/or physical discomfort and use purging as a way to cope. They may purge to try to relieve their discomfort and/or to cope with unwanted feelings.
- Some people engage in this behavior in hopes of losing, "managing," or maintaining their weight.

What factors can increase the risk of purging?

- Dieting, or restriction of food/calories including irregular eating and skipping meals
 - Undereating can also lead to cycles of overeating/binge-eating, which may increase risk of purging
- History of an eating disorder
- Body dissatisfaction and/or strong desire to change body weight/shape/size
- Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress

Impacts of purging

Most people who purge know it's not good for them and want to stop, but because it's such a complex problem, they don't. In addition, when people vomit without having immediate ill effects, they can develop a feeling of invulnerability — "those complications won't happen to me."

Purging can lead to medical complications. Here is a list of known problems that can result from self-induced vomiting:

- **Electrolyte abnormalities** can put people at risk for cardiac complications including abnormal heartbeats or heart/cardiac arrest.
 - Purging can lead to low blood potassium levels which can cause fatigue, weakness, and the above-mentioned cardiac complications.

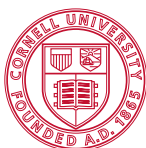


If you're struggling with purging, know that you're not alone. Support is available at Cornell Health.

- **Tooth decay or tooth loss** caused by the acid in vomit softening the enamel on teeth. To minimize damage, don't brush within an hour of purging. Instead, rinse your mouth with either water, a mixture of water and a small amount of baking soda, or fluoride.
- **Acid reflux.** Purging brings acid into the esophagus where it causes heartburn in the short run, and irreversible damage in the long run. Stomach acid in the esophagus increases the risk of esophageal cancer.
- **Salivary gland enlargement.** These glands, found in front of the ears on both sides of the face at the angle of the jaw, and below the jaw, can become enlarged and sometimes painful when stimulated by acid in vomit. This could make the lower face/neck appear swollen or "puffy."
- **Changes in digestive function, including constipation and/or bloating.**
- **Sore throat and hoarse voice** due to acid exposure to the voice box and throat.
- **Involuntary vomiting.** The muscle that normally prevents us from vomiting, the gastroesophageal sphincter, can become loosened by repeated vomiting.
 - Eventually, some people may have limited control over their ability to keep stomach contents down.
- **Tearing of the esophagus.** This can occur from repetitive purging. If you see tinges of blood in your vomit (bright red or brown-colored streaks) please seek emergency care.

While decreasing purging behaviors is encouraged, there are some risks with sudden purge cessation. These risks may include:

- Brief swelling, fullness, or discomfort of the salivary glands can occur 5-7 days after abrupt purge cessation for up to a week. (Over)



- Treatment with massage, warm compresses, sour foods, and plenty of fluids is often enough to help; however Acetaminophen or Ibuprofen can also be helpful.
- Swelling of the extremities with fluid retention (edema) can occur 5-7 days after abrupt purge cessation. Edema can be mild to moderately severe.
 - **Seek care with a medical provider urgently if swelling is significant.**

All of the above complications are unpredictable and can occur without warning, even in people who have previously purged without developing problems.

It is important to consult with your health care provider(s) or seek emergency services if you are experiencing any of the symptoms listed above.

How to get help

First, know that you are not alone and that this is a behavior that you can change. With the right support and professional guidance from a therapist, medical provider, and/or dietitian, you can start exploring the causes and impacts of these behaviors. Your willingness to explore the issue is probably the single most important step to reducing purging.

CHEP at Cornell Health

Cornell Health's **Collaborative Health and Eating Program (CHEP)** provides confidential care for students struggling with disordered eating, purging, and body image concerns.

To schedule an appointment, call 607-255-5155 or log in to myCornellHealth from any page of health.cornell.edu. Learn more about CHEP services at health.cornell.edu/CHEP:



Other options for support

- **National Alliance for Eating Disorders** provides referrals, support groups, and advocacy for treatment across the US. Visit allianceforeatingdisorders.com:



- **National Eating Disorders Association** provides information and referrals for treatment across the US. Call 800-931-2237 or visit nationaleatingdisorders.org:



- **Student Support and Advocacy services**, part of the Dean of Students Office at Cornell, supports students experiencing challenging life events. Students can get support for themselves, or refer a friend for support. Visit scl.cornell.edu/student-support:

