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JOHN BLOSSER

A **AMERICAN IDOL** star Katharine McPhee is fighting a desperate battle to save her voice - and her life!

The talented young singer's angelic voice may be silenced forever if she can't win her battle with a potentially deadly eating disorder called bulimia. The sickness, which is caused by repeated bingeing and purging of food, has already caused her chronic bronchitis and laryngitis and robbed the doe-eyed beauty of skipping appearances.

McPhee was even forced to bow out of the competition for the highly anticipated "American Idols Live!" tour, which was set to kick off July 5.

McPhee is not able to go on tour right now, says Abigail H. Natenshon, a clinical expert on eating disorders and author of the book "When Your Teen Has an Eating Disorder."

Although she has not treated McPhee, Natenshon says that if she were to quit counseling her on tour, she'd be in danger of triggering a relapse.

Bulimia is the most lethal of the mental health diseases," says Natenshon. "If she continued with bulimia, her voice could be destroyed for good. If the bulimia goes away, the damage continues.

Some people can stay in treatment for the first sign of relapse, these symptoms can be nipped in the bud. But bulimia is not a disease that can be completely eradicated in one or two months. You need to practice self-control to stay recovered - it takes time."

McPhee, 22, revealed her eating disorder secret - and the fact that

'IDOL' STAR BATTLES TO SAVE HER VOICE

she was in treatment - shortly after losing the "American Idol" competition to Alabama's Taylor Hicks on May 24.

"I was bingeing my whole life away for days at a time," she admitted. "Here I am, this singer, and it was so horrible on my vocal cords."

Dr. John Thomas, head of family practice at Pacific Hospital in Long Beach, Calif. - who has not treated Katharine - explained how bulimia

can result in long-term damage to the voice.

"If you vomit a great deal, you can cause reflux of acid up into the esophagus, which then can be aspirated into the airways, affecting the vocal cords," said Dr. Thomas.

"There definitely can be a link between bulimia and alteration of voice quality, and even possibly loss of voice."

Katharine admitted that at one

point, she would binge on food then force herself to vomit up to seven times a day.

But when she decided to compete on the fifth season of "American Idol," she knew she had to get a handle on her illness. With the support of her parents and actor boyfriend Nick Cokas, Katharine enrolled in an intensive three-month program, where she underwent group and individual