

Binge eating disorders

Most of us overeat from time to time, and many people often feel they've eaten more than they should have. However, an illness known as binge eating disorder is a far more serious condition. Eating a lot of food does not necessarily mean that a person has binge eating disorder.

About 2 percent of all adults in the U.S. (as many as 4 million Americans) have binge eating disorder.¹

Doctors generally agree that most people with serious binge eating problems often:

- Feel their eating is out of control
- Eat what most people would think is an unusually large amount of food
- Eat much more quickly than usual during binge episodes
- Eat until so full they are uncomfortable
- Eat large amounts of food even when they are not really hungry
- Eat alone because they are embarrassed about the amount of food they eat
- Feel disgusted, depressed, or guilty after overeating.

Binge eating also takes place in another eating disorder called bulimia nervosa. Persons with bulimia nervosa, however, usually purge, fast, or do strenuous exercise after they binge eat.

Purging means vomiting or using diuretics (water pills) or laxatives to keep from gaining weight. Fasting is not eating for at least 24 hours. Strenuous exercise, in this case, means exercising for more than an hour just to keep from gaining weight after binge eating. Purging, fasting, and over-exercising are dangerous ways to try to control your weight.

Prevalence and those most at risk

Binge eating disorder is probably the most common eating disorder. Most people with this problem are either overweight or obese, but normal-weight people also can have the disorder.

The disorder is even more common in people who are severely obese. Binge eating disorder is slightly more common in women than in men; three women for every two men have it.

People who are obese and have binge eating disorder often became overweight at a younger age than those without the disorder. They may also lose and gain back weight (yo-yo diet) more often.



About 10 to 15 percent of people who are mildly obese and who try to lose weight on their own or through commercial weight-loss programs have binge eating disorder.

Causes of binge eating disorder

No one knows for sure what causes binge eating disorder. As many as half of all people with binge eating disorder have been depressed in the past. Whether depression causes binge eating disorder or whether binge eating disorder causes depression is not known.

Many people who are binge eaters say that being angry, sad, bored, or worried can cause them to binge eat. Impulsive behavior (acting quickly without thinking) and certain other emotional problems can be more common in people with binge eating disorder.

It is also unclear if dieting and binge eating are related. Some studies show that about half of all people with binge eating disorder had binge episodes before they started to diet.

Researchers also are looking into how brain chemicals and metabolism (the way the body uses calories) affect binge eating disorder.

Complications of binge eating disorder

People with binge eating disorder can get sick because they may not be getting the right nutrients. They usually eat large amounts of fats and sugars, which don't have a lot of vitamins or minerals.

People with binge eating disorder are usually very upset by their binge eating and may become

very depressed. People who are obese and also have binge eating disorder are at risk for:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol levels
- Gallbladder disease
- Heart disease
- Certain types of cancer.

Most people with binge eating disorder have tried to control it on their own, but have not been able to control it for very long. Some people miss work, school, or social activities to binge eat. Persons who are obese with binge eating disorder often feel bad about themselves and may avoid social gatherings.

Most people who binge eat, whether they are obese or not, feel ashamed and try to hide their problem. Often they become so good at hiding it that even close friends and family members don't know they binge eat.

Dieting and binge eating disorder

People who are not overweight should avoid dieting because it sometimes makes their binge eating worse. Dieting in this case means skipping meals, not eating enough food each day, or avoiding certain kinds of food (such as carbohydrates). These are unhealthy ways to try to change your body shape and weight. Many people



with binge eating disorder are obese and have health problems because of their weight. These people should try to lose weight and keep it off. People with binge eating disorder who are obese may find it harder to stay in a weight-loss program. They also may lose less weight than other people, and may regain weight more quickly. (This can be worse when they also have problems like depression, trouble controlling their behavior, and problems dealing with other people.) These people may need treatment for binge eating disorder before they try to lose weight.

Treatment

People with binge eating disorder, whether or not they want to lose weight, should get help from a health professional such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker for their eating behavior. Even those who are not overweight are usually upset by their binge eating, and treatment can help them.

There are several different ways to treat binge eating disorder. Controlled treatment studies have shown that psychotherapeutic approaches and drug treatment may successfully reduce people's binge eating episodes. Cognitive-behavioral therapy teaches people how to keep track of their eating and change their unhealthy eating habits. It also teaches them how to change the way they act in difficult situations.

1. The National Institutes of Health, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization define overweight as a body mass index (BMI) of 25 to 29.9 and obesity as a BMI of 30 or more. Severe obesity is defined as having a BMI of 35 or higher. BMI is calculated by dividing weight (in kilograms) by height (in meters) squared.)

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Interpersonal psychotherapy helps people look at their relationships with friends and family and make changes in problem areas. Drug therapy, such as antidepressants, may also be helpful.

Researchers are still trying to find the treatment that is the most helpful in controlling binge eating disorder. The methods mentioned here seem to be equally helpful. For people who are overweight, a weight-loss program that also offers treatment for eating disorders might be the best choice.

If you think you might have binge eating disorder, it's important to know that you are not alone. Most people who have the disorder have tried but failed to control it on their own. You may want to get professional help. Talk to your health care provider about the type of help that may be best. The good news is that most people do well in treatment and can overcome binge eating.

Learn more about binge eating disorder

- **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)**
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
- **National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)**
www.anad.org
- **Binge Eating Disorder Association (BEDA)**
<http://bedaonline.com>