

Binge-Eating Disorder¹

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Binge Eating

Binge eating occurs when an individual repeatedly consumes large amounts of food over a very short period. Reportedly, 4.5% of people have experienced a binge episode at least once in their lifetime, while 2.8% have been diagnosed with binge eating disorder. Binge eating affects both males and females, although females are slightly more prone to episodes (4.0% and 4.9% respectively). Information about binge eating, and the subsequent development of binge-eating disorder, is gaining increased attention among researchers and practitioners.

Binge-Eating Disorder

Binge-eating disorder is a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. It occurs when an individual experiences a lack of control over the amount of food eaten and the frequency of consumption, in which that food is consumed at least two days a week, for at least a six-month period. During these periods, an individual must experience at least three of the following:

- Eating at a faster pace than usual

- Eating until overly full (feeling stuffed)
- Eating large amounts of food when not hungry
- Eating alone due to embarrassment about the amount of food consumed
- Feelings of disgust, guilt, or depression due to the overeating

Individuals also experience distress from the binge eating which manifests as problems in their personal relationships and/or work.

Causes of Binge Eating

Binge eating, for some, is used as a therapeutic tool to cope with negative feelings. In order to compensate for feelings of guilt, regret, and disgust following binge episodes, many bingers will binge again. People who binge also report feeling stress and pressure released through the binge-eating process. Others view an episode of binge eating as a “zone out” or a way to distance themselves from their problems.

Binge eating has been linked to other mental and physical health problems such as depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and obesity. Most binge eaters

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are overweight, and those with diagnosed binge-eating disorder are usually obese.

Risk Factors

Although women are more often affected by binge eating, it is still an area of concern for males. Approximately two men for every three women suffer from binge-eating disorder. Binge eaters are usually overweight and/or obese, with at least a brief history of depression and/or other emotional issues. Many have struggled with their weight and utilized measures such as yo-yo dieting, laxatives and diuretic use, and exercise as a means to lose weight in the past.

Mounting evidence shows that eating disorders such as binge eating do not affect only young, white women/girls. In fact, all ethnic groups are at risk for binge eating, often suffering more than their white peers. Given the link between obesity and binge eating, the vast numbers of women of color who are obese are at risk for developing binge-eating disorder.

Risk factors or characteristics linked to binge-eating disorder

- Frequent dieting (although some binge eaters have never dieted)
- Previous sexual abuse
- Preoccupation with body shape, size, and weight
- Overweight and obesity (more common in the severely obese)
- Health problems as a result of excessive weight gain, including but not limited to:
 - Diabetes
 - High blood pressure
 - Cancer
 - Heart disease
 - High cholesterol

- Gall bladder disease

Treatment Options for Binge-Eating Disorder

Treatments for binge-eating disorders are comparable to those used in treating bulimia because of the similarities between the two, with the exception of compensatory behaviors associated with bulimia such as purging, excessive exercise, and the use of diuretics and laxatives. Anti-depressants are usually prescribed to reduce depression, therefore reducing the number of bingeing episodes. In more extreme cases, appetite suppressants are given to curb feelings of hunger.

Therapy has also been shown to be effective in treating this disorder. Psychotherapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) are used to uncover and treat underlying psychological issues that may be catalysts for the binge eating. Group and family therapy is also effective in treating individuals and their families suffering from this disorder.

Additional Information

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org

Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc. www.anred.com

National Eating Disorders Association
www.edap.org

National Institutes of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

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