Binge eating disorder

Summary

- Binge eating disorder is a serious mental health condition.
- It affects people of all ages and from all backgrounds, and is the most common eating disorder in Australia.
- People with binge eating disorder regularly eat large quantities of food in a short timeframe and feel unable to stop themselves from eating.
- Many people with binge eating disorder are overweight or obese, but being overweight or obese does not mean you have binge eating disorder.
- Understanding the warning signs and symptoms, and seeking help as soon as possible, will help your recovery.
- You can recover from binge eating disorder with the right help and commitment.

Binge eating disorder is a serious mental illness. People with binge eating disorder will regularly (at least once a week) eat large quantities of food rapidly in a short period of time and feel out of control and unable to stop themselves from eating. This is often linked with high levels of distress.

Unlike people with bulimia nervosa or anorexia nervosa, people with binge eating disorder will not typically try to make up for the eating with compensatory behaviours such as vomiting or excessive exercise. This means that people with binge eating disorder are often overweight or can be obese.

However, being overweight or obese does not necessarily mean you have binge eating disorder. Binge eating is different from overeating, because it involves eating a large quantity of food, usually very rapidly, in a short period of time (within two hours) rather than long-term overeating or continual snacking on smaller amounts of food during the day that leads to weight gain in many people.

Binge eating disorder affects people of all ages and from all backgrounds. In 2012 it was estimated that in 2012, over 260,000 Australian women and 160,000 men had binge eating disorder, making it the most common eating disorder. The number of males diagnosed with eating disorders is rising and it is believed that approximately equal numbers of males and females may have binge eating disorder.

Unlike anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, there is not widespread public awareness of binge eating disorder, even though there are more people with this condition.

People with binge eating disorder often feel ashamed or guilty about the food they are eating. Binge eating often occurs when people are under stress, and it is frequently used as a way of coping with difficult emotions.

Symptoms of binge eating disorder

Not everyone who is overweight or obese has binge eating disorder. There are a number of signs and symptoms that suggest someone might have the condition and should seek help.

The two key features of binge eating disorder are:

- eating a very large amount of food in a short period of time (for example, two hours)
- feeling a sense of loss of control while eating (for example, feeling like you can’t stop eating).

These episodes occur frequently and involve portions of food larger than would simply be considered ‘overeating’.

Physical symptoms of binge eating disorder
Physical signs and symptoms include:
- feeling tired
- not sleeping well
- feeling bloated or constipated
- rapid weight gain.

**Psychological symptoms of binge eating disorder**
Psychological signs and symptoms can include:
- preoccupation or obsession with eating, food or body image
- sensitivity to comments about food, dieting, exercise or body image
- feelings of shame, guilt and self-loathing, especially after a binge eating episode
- feelings of extreme distress, sadness and anxiety, especially after a binge eating episode
- a distorted body image or extreme dissatisfaction with body shape
- low self-esteem, depression, anxiety or irritability.

**Behavioural symptoms of binge eating disorder**
Behavioural signs and symptoms can include:
- unexplained disappearance of food – hiding binge eating episodes
- secretive behaviour around food – hoarding food or hiding wrappers and packaging
- evading questions about eating and weight
- becoming more antisocial and withdrawn
- erratic behaviour – spending large amounts of money on food, or shoplifting food
- self-harming behaviour, use of substances and suicide attempts.

**Long-term effects of binge eating disorder**
Untreated and ongoing binge eating disorder can result in many physical and mental health problems including:
- cardiovascular disease
- type 2 diabetes
- high blood pressure and high cholesterol
- arthritis – especially in weight-bearing joints like knees and hips
- social isolation and loneliness
- depression or anxiety.

**Diagnosis of binge eating disorder**
To diagnose binge eating disorder or other eating disorders, a doctor will need to do a full physical check-up, carry out blood tests and ask questions about your health, including your emotional health and wellbeing, medical history and lifestyle.

Understanding the warning signs and symptoms and seeking help as soon as possible will help your recovery.

**Treatment of binge eating disorder**
Like other eating disorders, treatment for binge eating disorder needs to address both your physical and psychological health. Early treatment is the best way to help you towards a full recovery. The journey can be difficult, but you can get there with the right help and commitment.

A GP with experience supporting people with eating disorders can be a good first point of contact. Once binge eating disorder is diagnosed, your doctor will assemble a team of healthcare professionals who will be best suited to help you.
The types of healthcare professional who might be involved include:

- a psychiatrist
- a psychologist
- a dietitian
- a family therapist
- a social worker.

Specialist psychotherapy can be effective, but there are other psychotherapy, behavioural therapy and guided self-help options.

Your healthcare professionals will need to ask a lot of questions to help you work out the link between the way you think and your eating behaviour. Support groups can be helpful, but do not replace treatment from healthcare professionals.

Other treatment options include medications for any physical conditions that you might have and, in some cases, medication to help your mental health (for example, antidepressants).

**Where to get help**

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- A GP with experience supporting people with an eating disorder
- **Eating Disorders Victoria Helpline** Tel. 1300 550 236 – support from Monday to Friday 9.30 am to 5.00 pm
- Community health centre
- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **Suicide Line** Tel. 1300 651 251
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **Butterfly Foundation’s National Support Line** Tel. 1800 ED HOPE (1800 33 4673) – support from Monday to Friday 8 am to 9 pm (except public holidays)

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**This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:**

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