

Eating Disorders and Binge Eating

The information in this article is by no means intended as a substitute for medical advice from a qualified health practitioner. It does not recommend any one treatment, therapy or medication. Please seek medical advice as different medications suit different individuals.

Binge Eating Disorder (BED), also known as Compulsive Overeating, is characterised by periods of uncontrolled, impulsive, or continuous eating to the point of feeling uncomfortably full.

There is no purging involved but there are sporadic fasts and repetitive diets and feelings of shame, self-hatred and guilt after a binge.

“People who overeat compulsively may struggle with anxiety, depression, and loneliness, which can contribute to their unhealthy episodes of binge eating. Body weight may vary from normal to mild, moderate, or severe obesity”.

(National Eating Disorders Association website)

What is Binge Eating Disorder?

Binge eating disorder is characterised by recurrent binge eating without using compensatory measures such as vomiting, laxative abuse or excessive exercise to counter the binge.

Defining features of the Binge Eater include:

- Feeling out of control over their eating behaviour
- Eating more rapidly than normal
- Periods of uncontrolled, impulsive or continuous eating to the point of being uncontrollably full
- Eating when not physically hungry
- Eating alone because they feel ashamed and disgusted about their eating behaviours
- Repeated episodes of binge eating which often results in feelings of shame or guilt
- Eating in secret
- Other secretive behaviours that can go undetected for many years

(taken from the EDFV booklet: Information for families, partners & friends)

Why Does Someone Binge?

Reasons why a person may be involved in binge behaviour can vary.

When we go on strict diets we deprive our body of the nutrients it needs to function effectively. Subsequently, our body responds by becoming pre-occupied with food and eating.

Bingeing is often a result of not letting oneself eat what we really want to eat. This deprives us psychologically and triggers the emotional response of wanting to rebel and break out.

Overeating or bingeing can be a short-term way of dealing with uncomfortable feelings and painful issues.

Eating can be a ‘safe’ and predictable way of avoiding whatever is causing us pain and feeling the emotions that are involved.

Who is affected?

Between 3% & 7% of the population are affected by a binge eating disorder ^[1].

Unlike other eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa, the ratio of men to women who suffer from binge eating disorder is almost equal ^[2].

Binge eating disorder often develops during late adolescence and early 20’s ^[3].

Risk factors

Whilst there is no one factor that causes binge eating disorder, potential risk factors for developing the condition or engaging in binge eating behaviours include:

- Obesity
- Being overweight as a child
- A history of weight fluctuations and yo-yo dieting
- Strict dieting
- A history of depression or other psychological conditions such as anxiety
- Having low self-esteem and a poor body image

Complications that may arise from binge eating

People with a binge eating disorder are at risk of developing a variety of different medical conditions including:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol levels
- Gallbladder disease
- Heart disease
- Certain type of cancers

What are my options?

Whilst there are numerous treatment options available for people with binge eating disorder, it is important to identify the approach that is most suitable for you or the person with the condition.

Recovery often involves medical, nutritional and psychological treatment to manage the complex issues that may be underlying the disorder.

If you feel that you may have a binge eating disorder, it is recommended that you get in contact with your local General Practitioner.

Where do I go for Information and Support?

The Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria (EDFV) has a range of services including a Helpline that can provide you with Information, Support and Referral.

You can contact the EDFV on (03) 9885 0318 or for non-metro callers 1300 550 236 or alternatively access our website on www.eatingdisorders.org.au.

National Eating Disorders Association at www.edap.org

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- [1] Wilfley, D., Agras, W., Telch, W., Rossiter, E., Schneider, J., Cole, A., Sifford, L., and Raeburn, S. 1993. in Howell, P. Information on Eating Disorders for Health Practitioners. EDFV, Victoria. 1999
 - [2] Paxton, S. 1998. Do Men Get Eating Disorders? In Everybody. Newsletter of Body Image and Health Inc. Vol 2, August 1998
 - [3] The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, Universities of Newcastle and Queensland. Commenced. 1996

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Your First Step to Recovery

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