

Binge Eating Disorder

Walker's room is his oasis. It's where he listens to music, does his homework, and talks online with his friends. For the most part, it looks like a typical bedroom — except for what's under the bed. That's where Walker keeps his secret stash of snacks and tosses the empty candy wrappers, chip bags, and cookie boxes.

Walker has just polished off a whole package of cookies and a large bag of chips — and he hasn't even finished his homework yet. He's searching for more chips to eat while he does his math. He hates that he's overweight, but he can't seem to stop bingeing. In the back of his mind, he knows that in an hour or so he's going to feel guilty and disgusted with himself, but right now it feels like he just can't stop eating.

Understanding Binge Eating

If you gorged yourself on chocolate during Halloween or ate so much of your grandma's pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving that you had to wear elastic-waist pants afterwards, you know what it feels like to overeat. It's not unusual to overeat from time to time — most people do.

During our teens, the body demands extra nutrients to support growth of muscle and bone. So if you go through phases where you feel like eating more sometimes, that's usually why.

But binge eating is different from normal appetite increases or overeating from time to time. People with a binge eating problem consume unusually large amounts of food on a regular basis. They often eat quickly, do other things while eating (like watch TV or do homework), and don't stop eating when they're full. People who binge eat are usually overweight — even obese — because they habitually consume more calories than their bodies can use. As a result, they may feel bad about themselves and about their bodies.

Binge eating involves more than just eating a lot. People with this problem don't want to be overweight. They wish they could be trim and control their weight. Many times people who binge eat feel misunderstood. It's not as easy as others might think to just stop eating. With binge eating, a person feels out of control and powerless to stop eating while doing it. That's why binge eating is also called **compulsive overeating**.

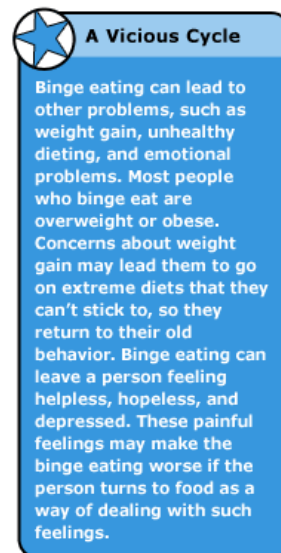
Emotions often play a role. People with a binge eating problem may overeat when they feel stressed, upset, hurt, or angry. Many find it comforting and soothing to eat, but after a binge they're likely to feel guilty and sad about the out-of-control eating. Binge eating is often a mixed-up way of dealing with or avoiding difficult emotions. Usually, people who binge eat aren't aware of what's driving them to overeat.

How Binge Eating Differs From Other Eating Disorders

Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating are all considered eating disorders because they involve unhealthy patterns of eating.

Both binge eating and bulimia involve eating too much food, feeling out of control while eating, and feeling guilty or ashamed afterward. With bulimia nervosa (sometimes called binge-purge syndrome), people vomit or use laxatives to try to keep themselves from gaining weight after eating. They may also try to burn off the extra calories by exercising compulsively as a way to make up for overeating. Usually, people with bulimia do not become noticeably overweight (like those with binge eating) or underweight (like those with anorexia).

Unlike bulimia, people with binge eating disorder do not use vomiting or laxatives to purge as a way to control weight. People with binge eating problems are usually overweight. They may try to diet, but often the diets are extreme or unhealthy. Efforts to adopt healthier ways of eating are often short-lived and unsuccessful.



A Vicious Cycle

Binge eating can lead to other problems, such as weight gain, unhealthy dieting, and emotional problems. Most people who binge eat are overweight or obese. Concerns about weight gain may lead them to go on extreme diets that they can't stick to, so they return to their old behavior. Binge eating can leave a person feeling helpless, hopeless, and depressed. These painful feelings may make the binge eating worse if the person turns to food as a way of dealing with such feelings.

Both bulimia and binge eating involve out-of-control overeating. Anorexia involves undereating, or restricting food. People with anorexia are obsessively preoccupied with thinness and starve themselves to feel more in control. A distorted body image leads them to believe they're fat — even though they actually may be dangerously thin. Like people with bulimia, some people with anorexia may also exercise compulsively to lose weight.

All three of these eating disorders involve unhealthy eating patterns that begin gradually and build to the point where a person feels unable to control them. All eating disorders can lead to serious health consequences, and all involve emotional distress.

Why Do Some People Binge Eat?

Most experts believe that it takes a combination of things to develop an eating disorder — including a person's genes, emotions, and behaviors (such as eating patterns) learned during childhood.

Some people may be more prone to overeating for biological reasons. For example, the hypothalamus (the part of the brain that controls appetite) may fail to send proper messages about hunger and fullness. And serotonin, a normal brain chemical that affects mood and some compulsive behaviors, may also play a role in binge eating.

In most cases, the unhealthy overeating habits that develop into binge eating start during childhood, sometimes as a result of eating habits learned in the family. It's normal to associate food with nurturing and love. But some families may overuse food as a way to soothe or comfort. When this is the case, kids may grow up with a habit of overeating to soothe themselves when they're feeling pressured because they may not have learned healthier ways to deal with stress. Some kids may grow up believing that unhappy or upsetting feelings should be suppressed and may use food to quiet these emotions.

Both guys and girls can have eating disorders. Anorexia and bulimia appear to be more common among girls. But binge eating seems to be just as likely to affect guys as girls.

It's hard to know just how many teens may have a binge eating problem. Because people often feel guilty or embarrassed about the out-of-control eating, many don't talk about it or seek help.

Signs of a Binge Eating Problem

Someone with a binge eating problem might:

- binge eat more than twice a week for 6 months or more
- eat much more rapidly than normal
- eat until uncomfortably full
- eat large amounts of food even when not hungry
- eat alone because of embarrassment
- feel disgusted, depressed, embarrassed, ashamed, angry, or guilty after a binge eating episode
- gain weight excessively

Getting Help

For many people with binge eating problems, it can seem hard to reach out for help because of the stigma that society places on overeating and being overweight. Many people don't get treatment for binge eating until they're adults trying to lose weight. But getting professional help as a teen can reduce some of the long-term health problems.

People with eating disorders need professional help because problems like binge eating can be caused by brain chemistry and other things that seem beyond someone's control. Doctors, counselors, and nutrition experts often work together to help those with eating disorders manage their eating, weight, and feelings.

Nutrition specialists or dietitians can help them learn about healthy eating behaviors, nutritional needs, portion sizes, metabolism, and exercise. They also can help design an eating plan that's specially designed for someone's needs and help the person stick with it and make progress.

Unlike a problem with drugs or alcohol where part of the treatment is avoiding the substance altogether, people still have to eat. This can make it harder for someone with a binge eating problem to overcome it because the temptation to overeat is always there. So part of dealing with a binge eating disorder is learning how to have a healthy relationship with food.

Psychologists and other therapists can help people learn healthy ways of coping with emotions, thoughts, stress, and other things that might contribute to someone's eating problem.



Sometimes certain family members can help by talking with the person and his or her therapist about shared eating patterns, feelings (and beliefs about how feelings should be expressed), and family relationships. Doing this can help someone examine how certain eating patterns might be influenced by family — and to change the patterns that aren't healthy.

Depending on what's behind someone's binge eating, doctors may prescribe medications along with therapy and nutrition advice.

People with binge eating disorder may find it helpful to surround themselves with supportive family members and friends. It's best to avoid people who make negative comments about eating or weight because they can add to someone's feelings of self-criticism, making matters worse.

Another thing that can help build self-confidence and take a person's mind off eating is trying a new extracurricular activity or hobby. Finding a way to express feelings, such as through music, art, dance, or writing, also can help someone deal with difficult emotions in a healthy way.

As with any eating disorder, there is no quick fix for binge eating. Treatment can take several months or longer while someone learns a healthier approach to food. But with the right guidance, commitment, and practice, it is possible to overcome old habits and replace them with healthier behaviors.

Note: All information is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.



© 1995– 2011 KidsHealth® All rights reserved.