

Binge eating disorder

Understanding Treatment Options



Anna Freud
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generation

What is binge eating disorder?

Binge eating disorder involves eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time, on a regular basis. You may also feel you cannot control your eating, or that during binges you feel numb or zone out and are less aware of what you are doing.

You can develop binge eating disorder at any age, but it usually starts in your late teens or early 20s, and is rarer in children. Binge eating disorder can be ongoing, but commonly goes in cycles of getting better and worse. This means that you could be symptom-free for weeks or months before the binge eating behaviours return again.

People with binge eating disorder usually binge eat when they're on their own. You might plan the binge eating in advance and might have certain foods which you include. This type of eating would make you feel uncomfortably full and you might feel guilty or ashamed afterwards.

Binge eating disorder is different to bulimia nervosa, because binge eating disorder does not usually involve weight control measures such as purging (self-induced vomiting or laxative use) or excessive exercise. If you have binge eating disorder you may have a normal eating pattern between binges, or may sometimes skip meals.

People who have binge eating disorder are more often overweight, but can also be a normal weight. The main physical health risks for people who have binge-eating disorder are related to being overweight.

How can I get help?

Binge eating disorder is often a problem that is kept hidden, as sometimes people can feel embarrassed or ashamed. People with binge eating disorder often wait many years before getting help.

It can also be difficult to diagnose binge eating disorder in children and young people because while you are growing your appetite and eating patterns can vary, with growth spurts and changes in activity levels. Binge eating disorder is also less widely known than anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa, so people are less aware that it is a mental health condition that can be treated.

If you are worried that you have binge eating disorder, you should talk to your GP who will be able to refer you for help. They may need to find out more about your eating patterns, general health and growth to check that there isn't another reason for your binge eating.

If it is likely that you have binge eating disorder your GP can refer you to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or to the Children and Young People's Community Eating Disorders Service (CYP-CEDS).

Planning treatment

The first step is to assess whether you have binge eating disorder, or whether your binge eating may be part of another eating disorder such as bulimia nervosa or anorexia nervosa. Your assessment should also look at whether you could have any other mental health conditions such as depression.

Your professional should ask about whether something in particular might have triggered your binge eating disorder, anything that might be keeping it going and the kinds of support that you and your family might need. As part of your assessment you may also need to have a review of your physical health.

There isn't much research on binge eating disorder in children and young people and treatment recommendations are often based on what works for adults. Your professional should adapt these recommendations to your age and specific needs, such as whether it would be helpful to involve your parents or carers in your treatment.

Psychological treatments for binge eating disorder focus on your binge eating behaviour rather than weight loss and these treatments will have a limited effect on your body weight.

The treatments you are likely to be offered by your professional are briefly described in this section.

Guided self-help programmes

You could be offered guided self-help as the first step in your treatment. Guided self-help involves working through a self-help book. You would usually be offered sessions with a professional to support you during the self-help programme.

Eating disorder-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT-ED)

If self-help is not right for you or has not helped with your binge eating, then you should be offered eating disorder-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT-ED).

Your professional might suggest that you try group CBT-ED first, but you could also have individual CBT-ED if you prefer or if there isn't a group for young people of your age in your area.

Other treatments for binge eating disorder

Other treatments such as interpersonal therapy and medication are sometimes offered to adults with binge eating disorder, but there is much less evidence about whether they are helpful for children and young people.

If you have another physical health condition (e.g. diabetes) that might be affected by your binge eating disorder, then your eating disorder team should work with your physical health professionals to coordinate your physical and mental health care.

What about my parents or carers?

For other eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, treatments which involve parents or carers are usually more helpful. There has been less research on this for binge eating disorder, partly because most of the research on binge eating disorder has been carried out with adults.

There is a type of eating disorder-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT-ED) that includes sessions with parents or carers. This involves helping them to understand binge eating disorder and what they can do to help, and might be suggested by your professional.

The wellbeing of your parents or carers is important. Your team should make sure they receive any support they need, which could include practical support, emergency plans or emotional support.

Transitions between services

Transitioning from CAMHS to adult services can be a worrying time. To help it go smoothly, your professional should leave plenty of time to work with you on planning the change. You should be given clear information about what to expect from adult services and during your transition a professional from the adult service should join your CAMHS meetings to get to know you and your family. You should be able to talk to them about any concerns you have.

Binge eating disorder-focused guided self-help

Emerging evidence

Guided self-help programmes are based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of therapy where you learn about how your feelings, thoughts and

behaviours affect each other, and can help you change the way you think, behave and feel. “Cognitive” refers to the events that take place in your mind, such as thoughts, images, memories, or processes like worrying. “Behaviour” is what you do, for example hiding, or avoiding something.

Guided self-help programmes involve working through the activities in a workbook. As well as working through the book, you will usually be offered sessions with a therapist who can help you to stick to the programme and address any difficulties you might be having.

Guided self-help can be more helpful if you are motivated and old enough to be able to work through the programme yourself. Your professional may not offer you this treatment option if you are younger and/or need more support with treatment.

Eating disorder-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT-ED)

Emerging evidence

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Group CBT-ED

Your professional could suggest group CBT-ED if binge eating disorder-focused guided self-help isn’t possible, or hasn’t been helpful. Group CBT-ED should help you to cope with your triggers for binge eating and avoid binge eating episodes.

Group CBT-ED involves group meetings with other people of a similar age to yourself, with sessions specifically designed for young people. These sessions are usually 90-minutes each week for 4 months, including psychoeducation, support with monitoring your eating behaviour, and helping you to analyse your challenges and goals. The sessions also involve:

- making a daily food plan
- identifying binge eating cues
- body exposure training
- helping you to identify and change negative beliefs about your body

There may not be group CBT-ED available for people your age in your area, and if this is the case you should be offered individual CBT-ED instead.

Individual CBT-ED

You should be offered individual CBT-ED if group CBT-ED is not possible, or if you don't feel a group is right for you.

Individual CBT-ED usually involves 16 to 20 sessions with a therapist, which will look at how your eating patterns, thoughts and feelings could contribute to your binge eating. Your therapist should work with you to establish a regular eating pattern and help you to learn strategies to manage triggers for your binge eating. This could include weekly monitoring of your binge eating behaviours, dietary intake and weight, with this information shared between you and your therapist.

CBT-ED might also include sessions with your parents or carers, to look at how they can support you with your eating disorder and any triggers.

CBT-ED does not aim for weight loss, but stopping binge eating can result in weight loss in the long term. You should not try to lose weight during the treatment, as this could trigger your binge eating.

Interpersonal therapy

Emerging evidence

Interpersonal therapy (IPT) is an individual talking therapy. IPT looks at the role of your relationships with other people in your mental health and how your relationships could be a source of support in overcoming your binge eating disorder. Your therapist will work with you to help you look at the links between what happens in your relationships and strategies to manage your binge eating.

Although there is research to support that interpersonal therapy can help with depression for young people, there isn't much research on IPT for binge eating disorder.

Medication

Insufficient evidence

You should not be offered medication as your only treatment for binge eating disorder.

There is some evidence for adults that medication can help with binge eating disorder. These medications include a type of antidepressant called a selective

serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), and an ADHD medication called lisdexamfetamine. Research has suggested that these might be helpful in reducing binge eating in the short term, but the long-term effects are unclear.

These medications are not often used to treat binge eating disorder in children and young people and medication is not recommended as a treatment by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

If you take medication for other mental or physical health conditions then your professional should keep track of your dose. Eating disorders can affect how your body absorbs and reacts to medications, which can lead to a greater risk of negative side effects.