
BINGE EATING

Binge eating is defined as the consumption of an unusually large amount of food within a relatively short period of time (e.g. two hours) in a way that feels out of control. “Overeating” (e.g. eating more than usual at a holiday dinner) is different as it does not involve a sense of loss of control.

nedic

National Eating Disorder Information Centre

www.nedic.ca

Binge-eating disorder is a formally-recognized eating disorder characterized by recurrent episodes of binge-eating that involve three or more of the following:

- Eating very quickly
- Eating regardless of hunger cues, even if one is already full
- Eating until uncomfortably or painfully full
- Eating alone due to embarrassment about the quantity of food ingested
- Feelings of self-disgust, guilt, or depression

Affected individuals experience significant distress regarding their eating behaviours. In general, the binge-eating episodes are not followed by behaviours to compensate for the food consumed, such as vomiting or exercising intensely, but it is common for those with binge-eating disorder to diet repeatedly.

Binge-eating is also one of the primary symptoms of bulimia nervosa and the binge-eating/purging subtype of anorexia nervosa.

WHO EXPERIENCES BINGE EATING?

Many people have difficulties with binge eating at some point in their life, and an estimated that 2 to 3% of people experience symptoms sufficient for a diagnosis of BED in their lifetime. People of all ages, genders, socioeconomic classes, racial backgrounds, ethnicities, and abilities can be affected.

WHAT TRIGGERS BINGE EATING?

Binge eating is a complex behaviour with multiple contributing factors. Common triggers include:

Undereating or breaking a dietary rule

The human body is adapted for survival. When it does not get enough energy (calories) from food – whether it is the result of dieting or unintentional restriction – processes to defend against starvation and maintain its set-point weight are activated. A person who wants to lose weight may try to keep their energy intake low by eating very small meals, which they may succeed in doing during the day, but in the evening may be overcome by intense cravings or hunger that lead to bingeing. Trying to follow dietary rules that call for unnecessary avoidance of certain foods may also eventually lead to binge eating those foods. Undereating due to food insecurity can also trigger bingeing.

Adverse events and emotions

Emotional stress can further increase vulnerability to bingeing in a person whose body is deprived of adequate energy. For some individuals, binge eating may serve as a way of coping with challenging life events or intense emotions. Situations that may lead to binge eating include:

- Feeling lonely or disconnected from others
- Feeling tired
- Disinhibition (e.g. after drinking alcohol)
- Major life stressors (e.g. loss of a partner, loss of one's job, health issues, trauma)
- Experiencing intense emotions (e.g. anxiety, sadness, guilt, shame, anger – and even happiness)

HOW DOES BINGE EATING AFFECT PEOPLE?

After a binge, an individual may experience feelings that include helpless, lonely, regretful, ashamed, or confused. Societal messages that associate binge eating with greed or lack of willpower can make people who engage in it feel badly about themselves. The complexity of this behaviour makes it difficult to change, which can be a major source of distress. The monetary cost of binge eating can also be distressing.

HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE WHO HAS DIFFICULTIES WITH BINGE EATING?

- Seek credible information about eating disorders and the risks of dieting, and learn as much as you can – the more you know, the more you can help.
- Reflect on your beliefs about eating and weight, and whether they are biased in any way. Be mindful of how you communicate about eating and weight.
- Let the individual know you are concerned by noting specific behaviours you have observed. Avoid talk that focuses on appearance or weight. Let them know that you are willing to provide support.
- Find out where the individual can go for help and encourage them to seek it.
- Provide the individual with information to help them understand the link between binge eating and dieting, and the impact of binge eating and dieting on social, emotional, and physical well-being.
- Understand your limits and take care of your own needs. Role-model healthy attitudes and behaviours around self-care.

HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF IF I HAVE DIFFICULTIES WITH BINGE EATING?

- Talk to someone you trust about your difficulties with binge eating. Support and understanding can help decrease feelings (e.g. loneliness, shame) that trigger or perpetuate bingeing. If you do not receive the support you need the first time, do not give up! You are not alone in your experience.
- Do not go on weight loss or other unnecessary food elimination diets. Remember that restriction often leads to binge eating because it is one of the ways in which the human body protects itself when it does not get adequate energy. Dieting also creates feelings of emotional deprivation, which can be as powerful as physical deprivation.
- Plan for regular eating throughout the day. Particularly during the initial stage of addressing binge eating, eating three meals plus two or three snacks spaced no more than a few hours apart helps prevent both biological and psychological factors that can trigger bingeing.
- Avoid assigning moral values to foods and labelling them with words like “bad” or “junk”. Give yourself full permission to eat all types of foods. Aim to eat a variety of foods that you enjoy and that leave you feeling well-nourished.

- Check for and challenge unhelpful thinking patterns. All-or-nothing thinking related to food and eating and harsh self-criticism are more likely to perpetuate bingeing than to interrupt it. Create a list of more balanced thoughts and practice using them when unhelpful thoughts arise.
- Learn to recognize and understand the emotions that underlie your eating patterns. Distraction or positive coping strategies (like having a meal with a loved one or taking a mindful pause) can help create space between feelings and habitual responses (e.g. acting on the urge to binge).
- Find positive ways to nurture yourself emotionally and physically. Think about what truly matters to you and choose actions that are in line with your values and long-term goals.

HOW DO I GET PROFESSIONAL HELP?

Primary care providers (family doctors and nurse practitioners) play an important role in addressing binge eating concerns, which can span diagnosing, referring to eating disorder treatment programs, and providing regular medical supervision. Consider talking to your primary care provider as one of your first steps.

Many people who experience binge eating find counselling or psychotherapy essential to their recovery. Cognitive behavioural therapy is well established as the leading approach to treating binge eating, and there is evidence supporting the use of dialectical behaviour therapy. Nutrition counselling can also be very helpful.

NEDIC maintains a national directory of service providers that have expertise in eating disorders, ranging from publicly-funded treatment clinics, to community-based organizations, to professionals in private practice (including counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists, and dietitians) – you can contact us for referrals.

BINGE EATING

You may find this checklist useful in opening up a conversation about your binge eating concerns with a health professional.

Physical issues (check any that apply):

- Unusual weight changes
- Bloating
- Frequent stomach aches
- Constipation

Behaviours (check any that apply):

- Skipping meals
- Avoiding eating with others
- Eating in secret
- Hiding food
- Eating in a way that feels out of control
- Withdrawing from social activities

Mood changes (check any that apply):

- Increased anxiousness
- Increased irritability
- Low mood or depression

Other:

National Eating Disorder Information Centre

200 Elizabeth St., ES 7-421 Toronto, ON M5G 2C4 Canada

Tel: 416-340-4156


Toll-free: 1-866-NEDIC-20

Email: nedic@uhn.ca

Web and live chat: www.nedic.ca

NEDIC relies heavily on donations and fundraising opportunities to support our programs. Visit nedic.ca/donate to make a contribution.

Charitable Registration Number 12386 4068 RR 0001

 [thenedic](https://www.facebook.com/thenedic)

 [@the_nedic](https://www.instagram.com/the_nedic)

 [@thenedic](https://www.tiktok.com/@thenedic)

 [@theNEDIC](https://twitter.com/theNEDIC)