

What is Binge Eating?

Binge eating is a very common feature in eating disorders. Even people who do not have an eating disorder may binge eat from time to time. There are different types of binge eating.

Objective binge eating involves experiencing a loss of control over eating while eating an unusually large portion of food in one sitting (e.g., 2-3 times more than the average person might eat for a meal or snack). Many people describe feeling like they can't stop eating once they have started. This is often followed by intense feelings of guilt, disgust and shame, and can lead to a desire to compensate or reduce the amount of energy that has been consumed (e.g., by vomiting or using laxatives).

Subjective binge eating occurs when someone feels a similar sense of loss of control over their eating but does not actually consume an objectively large amount of food. Subjective binges often reflect anxiety about eating.

Overeating is a normal behaviour that all people engage in from time to time. For example, having more to eat at Christmas lunch, or out with friends, or when a particular food is just delicious! Overeating does not involve feeling out of control.

Facts About Binge Eating

- Binge eating usually occurs in a short period of time (2 hrs), but can last up to a whole day.
- Some people engage in binge eating many times in a day. Others may only binge eat once in a while.
- Sometimes binge eating is followed by purging, fasting, or driven exercise behaviours.
- Binge eating can occur in secret or in front of others.

What Triggers Binge Eating?

- **Physical hunger:** When you are not eating regularly, adequately, or enough variety, your clever body will attempt to correct the energy deficit by leading you to eat more so you don't starve. Eating inadequately can lead to thinking about food constantly, overwhelming hunger, or a strong physiological drive to eat (even without obvious hunger signals), which can trigger binge eating.
- **Psychological hunger:** Attempting to follow rigid dietary rules can trigger binge eating. This is because

you tend to think about and crave the exact foods that you are trying to avoid – that's just how brains work! Plus, these rules are usually so rigid that they are impossible to follow, and it's only a matter of time until they are broken. When a rule is broken, many people say to themselves "I've failed so I may as well keep going and get back on track tomorrow". This 'all-or-nothing' thinking is very common and can reinforce the restrict-binge cycle.

- **Distress:** Sometimes people binge eat to try and regulate, control, or numb intense feelings. Binge eating may also happen when people are wanting to escape unpleasant physical symptoms, such as being tired or experiencing pain. Sometimes positive emotions, such as excitement or relief, can trigger binge eating.

Problems Associated With Binge Eating

- **Physical health problems:** Binge eating can lead to unstable blood sugars and disrupt typical hunger and fullness signals. It can cause liver dysfunction and increased acid reflux, and make it difficult to work out your natural set point weight range.
- **Negative emotions and thoughts:** Binge eating often makes people feel distressed, fuelling self-criticism and feelings of guilt, shame, and disgust—increasing the chances of another binge!
- **Avoidance and distress intolerance:** In the short-term, binge eating can provide a sense of comfort, distraction from upsetting emotions, or even euphoria. If you use binge eating to avoid or escape from distress then you won't learn to deal with these feelings in other more helpful ways and will likely continue to struggle tolerating distress.
- **Keeps the eating disorder going:** Binge eating increases concern about eating, weight, and shape, and often leads to renewed attempts to 'make up for' the binge. This keeps you stuck in a pattern of restriction and binge-eating that can be very difficult to break.

If you would like to learn strategies to reduce binge eating and for help with an eating disorder, you can access our free Cognitive Behavioural Therapy self-help workbook [Break Free from ED](#). If you, or someone close to you has signs of an eating disorder, it is important to see your GP and discuss seeking help as soon as possible.

