

Central Office:
505 Silas Deane Highway
Wethersfield, CT 06109
Phone (860) 721-2822
Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin Office:
240 Kensington Road
Berlin, CT 06037
Phone (860) 828-7017
Fax (860) 828-9248

Newington Office:
131 Cedar Street
Newington, CT 06111
Phone (860) 665-8586
Fax (860) 665-8533

Rocky Hill Office:
761 Old Main Street
Rocky Hill, CT 06067
Phone (860) 258-2770
Fax: (860) 258-2767

February 19, 2007

Binge Eating is the Most Common Eating Disorder

Nearly everyone has been guilty of overeating at one time or another. For most people, this is only an occasional occurrence, but for some, eating too much is a way of life. In fact, the problem of overeating can even take over one's life. When this occurs, a person is said to suffer from an eating disorder known as binge eating.

Eating disorders are illnesses that have a biological basis that can be triggered and influenced by emotional and cultural factors. An obsession with food, weight, or body shape is characteristic of an eating disorder. This obsession can lead to frequent dieting, fasting, over-exercising, bingeing, and purging behaviors. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, people with eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric diagnosis. Further, they estimate that 5 to 10 million women and girls have an eating disorder, and they are joined by another 1 million men and boys.

Perhaps the best-known eating disorders are anorexia and bulimia. People with anorexia suffer from a life-threatening illness in which they starve themselves so that weight loss is excessive. Individuals with bulimia eat excessive amounts of food, often in secret, and then purge their systems by vomiting, using laxatives, or exercising too much.

Recently, researchers at the Harvard Medical School reported that a national survey found binge eating is considerably more common in the United States than anorexia and bulimia combined. Findings included the information that 3.5% of women and 2% of men have experienced uncontrolled eating binges without purging at some point in their lives. Additionally, while all three disorders are associated with depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders, binge eating also is strongly associated with obesity.

Because binge eating is a newly recognized disorder in its own right, little research has been done to determine what causes it to occur. Most experts agree that a combination of factors plays a role in the development of a binge eating disorder, including genetics (it often occurs in several members of the same family), emotions, and learned behaviors.

While the cause of binge eating disorder is unknown, much is known about its symptoms. Signs of this disorder can be emotional, behavioral, or both. They include

- Eating until there is pain or discomfort,
- Eating larger amounts of food in one sitting than a normal meal or snack would entail,
- Eating faster than usual during a binge episode,
- Eating when not hungry,
- Eating alone frequently,
- Hoarding food and hiding empty food containers,
- Being unable to lose weight, even though there may be frequent dieting,
- Feeling ashamed, guilty, or disgusted about overeating,
- Feeling depressed or anxious,

- Feeling out of control,
- Acting impulsively (without thinking),
- Abusing alcohol,
- Refusing to talk about one's own feelings.

Like bulimia, eating disorders are long lasting, with people reporting struggling with these conditions for an average of 8 years.

Although people with binge eating disorder may be of normal weight, a large number of them gain weight to the point of obesity. Being obese or over-weight increases the risk of a number of health problems, including type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, gallbladder disease, heart disease, and certain types of cancer.

As new research is conducted to learn more about binge eating, certain treatments have been shown to be effective in overcoming this disorder. They typically involve a multi-disciplinary approach in which medical doctors, psychologists, and nutritionists play a role. Nutrition specialists can teach people about healthy eating behaviors, portion control, nutritional needs, metabolism, and exercise. Psychologists can assist people in learning coping strategies for their emotions, stresses, and thoughts. One theory that is being tested is that binge eating may be caused by the brain's chemistry. Doctors can help by prescribing medications that help to correct chemical imbalances as well as relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression.

People who suffer from binge eating disorder have a serious illness; they do not choose to overeat. It is important that the condition is treated to avoid further medical and psychological complications. To obtain help and learn more about binge eating, contact the National Eating Disorder Association (www.nationaleatingdisorders.org) at 1-800-931-2237, the Academy for Eating Disorders (www.aedweb.org) at 1-703-556-9222, or the Weight Control Information Network of the National Institutes of Health (www.win.niddk.nih.gov) at 1-877-946-4627. For additional information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District (www.ccthd.org) at 860-721-2822.