



Study: Binge eating is No. 1 food disorder in USA

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Binge eating disorder — frequent, uncontrolled bouts of eating without purging — is the most common eating disorder in the USA, more widespread than anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa, according to the first large-scale national survey on these conditions.

The binge disorder, which afflicts 3.5% of women and 2% of men and lasts an average of eight years, can lead to severe obesity, says lead researcher **James Hudson**, director of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Program at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont, Mass.

Such people eat large amounts of food in short periods of time at least twice weekly. They feel out of control when they are overeating, Hudson says. "Binge eating disorder may explain in part why it's so difficult for some people to control their weight" and why some become severely obese, he says.

A 5-foot-6 woman is severely obese if she weighs 248 pounds or more; a 5-foot-9 man falls in this category if he weighs 270 pounds or more, he says.

Hudson and colleagues analyzed data from about 3,000 people who were asked about their mental health in face-to-face interviews in a separate national study. Findings in the journal *Biological Psychiatry*:

- About 0.9% of women and 0.3% of men said that at some point in their lives they have had anorexia nervosa, which is self-starvation. It lasted an average of 1.7 years.
- 1.5% of women and 0.5% of men said they have had bulimia nervosa, the binge-and-purge disorder that often involves self-induced vomiting. It lasted an average of 8.3 years.
- Fewer than half the people with the disorders got treatment.
- People with the eating disorders often have other mental health problems.

Estimates of eating-disorder cases "are probably low because people are very ashamed of these and tend to under-report them," Hudson says. The disorders have become more prevalent in the past 50 years, he says.

Eating disorders are caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors, says psychologist Cynthia Bulik, a professor of eating disorders at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Researchers may ultimately discover that eating disorders, anxiety disorders and mood disorders share a common biological abnormality such as a chemical imbalance in the brain, Hudson says.

BINGE, BY DEFINITION

Binge eating disorder "is quite different from the ordinary munching you might do for the Super Bowl," says **Harrison Pope, Jr.**, a researcher who treats people with eating disorders at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont, Mass. People who have the disorder "can't stop once they get started even though they feel uncomfortably full."