

Are people with ADHD more likely to get eating disorders?

[Are they linked?](#) [ADHD and overeating](#) [Eating disorder symptoms](#)

[Risk factors](#) [Treatment](#) [Summary](#)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental condition. Research has shown a link between ADHD and certain eating disorders.

For instance, a 2018 study in [Psychiatry Research](#)[®] reports links between [ADHD](#) and both [bulimia nervosa](#) and [binge eating disorder \(BED\)](#).

Eating disorders are a type of mental health condition that can have serious negative consequences on a person's mental and physical health. People with eating disorders display harmful behaviors and attitudes in relation to food, eating, and body image.

Keep reading to learn about the link between eating disorders and ADHD, including who is at risk and the treatment options.

ADVERTISEMENT



Medically reviewed by
[Marney A. White, PhD, MS,](#)
Psychology — Written by
Lauren Hellicar on May 31,
2022

ADVERTISEMENT

MEDICALNEWS TODAY

[Health Conditions](#) ▾

[Health Products](#) ▾

[Discover](#) ▾

[Tools](#) ▾

[Connect](#) ▾

[SUE](#)



Latest news

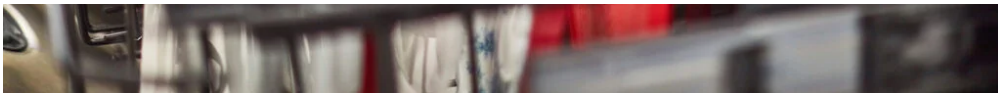
ADVERTISEMENT



Could simple blood tests improve Alzheimer's diagnosis in the future?



Damage to gut lining from ulcers, ibuprofen may increase Parkinson's risk



CatLane/Getty Images

Research suggests that there is a link between ADHD and some, but not all, eating disorders.

There are various types of eating disorders, [including](#) [🔗]:

- **Bulimia nervosa:** A person with this eating disorder, known as bulimia, will binge on large amounts of food in a short space of time and then “compensate” by exercising excessively or purging, which may involve vomiting or using laxatives.
- **Binge eating disorder (BED):** This is similar to bulimia, but people do not engage in compensatory behaviors.
- **Anorexia nervosa:** People with [anorexia nervosa](#), known as anorexia, severely restrict their food intake, and they may rely on a limited number of “safe” foods.

The authors of the previously mentioned [2018 study](#) [🔗] report links between ADHD and both bulimia and BED. They conclude that the links between ADHD and eating disorders could be due to the presence of other psychiatric disorders. The study did not show a link between ADHD and anorexia.

Help is available

Eating disorders can severely affect the quality of life of people living with these conditions and those close to them. Early intervention and treatment greatly improve the likelihood of recovery.

Anyone who suspects they or a loved one may have an eating disorder can contact the [National Alliance for Eating Disorders](#), which offers a daytime helpline staffed by licensed therapists and an online search tool for treatment options.

For general mental health support at any time, people can call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 24 hours a day at [1-800-662-4357](#) (or [1-800-487-4889](#) for TTY).

Many other resources are also available, including:

- [The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders](#)
- [F.E.A.S.T.](#), which provides support and educational resources to friends and family who want to help someone living with an eating disorder



ADVERTISEMENT

BetterHelp

Affordable care from a therapist who understands you. Get matched with a licensed therapist on BetterHelp in as little as 24 hours.

Enjoy 20% off your first month

[TAKE ASSESSMENT](#)



Can sleeping on your back increase your risk for Alzheimer's disease?



Researchers pinpoint new cardiovascular risk factor, suggest potential treatment



Could potassium levels in blood help diagnose Alzheimer's early?

ADVERTISEMENT

ADHD and overeating

[Experts say](#) that ADHD's link to bulimia and BED may be a result of similarities between the conditions.

The hallmarks of ADHD include hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention. Both bulimia and BED involve binge eating, which people consider an impulsive behavior.

People with ADHD may also overeat because they are seeking stimulation.

When someone has ADHD, their brain may be [lacking dopamine](#), a neurotransmitter that plays a role in reward and motivation. Therefore, they may sometimes use food to achieve a dopamine hit.

Problems arise when regular overeating causes feelings of self-loathing, distress, and an inability to control the behavior. When this occurs, the behavior can develop into an eating disorder.

ADVERTISEMENT

Signs and symptoms of ADHD and eating disorders

ADHD [often presents](#) with symptoms similar to those of other conditions, such as [sleep disorders](#), [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and some learning disabilities.

The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5)* outlines the diagnostic criteria for a wide range of mental health conditions. It lists the [criteria](#) for an ADHD diagnosis as:

- five or more symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity, inattention, or both, lasting at least 6 months
- several inattentive or hyperactive-impulsive symptoms before the age of 12 years
- several symptoms in two or more settings — for example, at home and at school or work
- the symptoms interfere with or reduce the quality of social, school, or work capabilities
- the symptoms do not meet the diagnostic criteria for another mental health condition

In children aged up to 16 years, six or more symptoms of inattention and hyperactivity must be present for at least 6 months.

According to the [National Institutes of Health \(NIH\)](#), symptoms of bulimia and BED — the two eating disorders associated with ADHD — include the following.

Bulimia nervosa

ADVERTISEMENT

The symptoms of bulimia include:

- eating unusually large amounts of food in a discrete period
- a sense of loss of control during the eating episodes

- harmful compensatory behaviors, such as vomiting, excessive exercise, or laxative misuse
- self-criticism of body shape or weight

Additionally, the physical signs of bulimia can include:

- chronically inflamed and sore throat
- swollen salivary glands in the neck and jaw
- worn tooth enamel and increasingly sensitive and decaying teeth due to stomach acid exposure
- acid reflux disorder and other gastrointestinal problems
- intestinal distress and irritation from laxative abuse
- severe dehydration from purging fluids
- electrolyte imbalance — meaning excessively high or low levels of sodium, calcium, potassium, and other minerals — which can lead to stroke or heart attack

Binge eating disorder

The symptoms of BED include:

- eating unusually large amounts of food in a specific period
- eating even when full or not hungry
- eating quickly during binge episodes
- eating until uncomfortably full
- eating alone or in secret to avoid embarrassment
- feeling distressed, ashamed, or guilty about eating
- frequently dieting, possibly without weight loss

ADVERTISEMENT

Get our weekly ADHD email

To help you find and maintain your focus, we'll send you news, answers, and guidance.

JOIN NOW

☐ Also sign up for our popular Heart Health newsletter

Your [privacy](#) is important to us

Was this article helpful?

Yes

No

Which people with ADHD are most likely to get eating disorders?

Females have a [higher risk](#) [🔗] than males of eating disorders. Due to [the link](#) [🔗] between ADHD and eating disorders, females with ADHD could be more likely to develop eating disorders.

However, this does not mean that eating disorders cannot affect males, who are [less likely](#) to seek a diagnosis and treatment.

For example, BED affects males and females at [relatively equal rates](#) [🔗]. Overeating is more prevalent than restriction in people with ADHD, so males with ADHD may be at a higher risk of binge eating.

Treating ADHD and eating disorders

Healthcare professionals commonly prescribe stimulants to treat ADHD. About [70–80%](#) of children with ADHD experience fewer ADHD symptoms when taking these medications.

Some medications can treat both ADHD and eating disorders.

For instance, [lisdexamfetamine dimesylate](#) is a type of stimulant medication that the manufacturer originally marketed for the treatment of ADHD. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has since approved the drug for use in treating moderate or severe BED in adults.

Most treatment protocols for mental health conditions include both medication and psychotherapy. [Cognitive behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#) is a popular and effective form of talk therapy that may be helpful for people with eating disorders and ADHD.

In a 2018 study in the [Journal of Attention Disorders](#), researchers found that CBT could reduce ADHD symptoms, improve executive function, and ease symptoms of anxiety and depression. These benefits continued for at least 5 months after stopping therapy.

A 2019 study in [Psychiatric Clinics of North America](#) confirmed that CBT is the first-line treatment for BED and bulimia.

ADVERTISEMENT

Summary

Research shows a link between ADHD and certain eating disorders, such as bulimia and BED. ADHD does not appear to have an association with anorexia.

This may be due to the fact that overeating is an impulsive behavior, while undereating is a restrictive behavior.

Alongside talk therapy, the drug lisdexamfetamine dimesylate can help treat ADHD and BED. If a person has symptoms of ADHD or an eating disorder, they should contact a doctor.

ADVERTISEMENT

Explore online talk therapy options



4.5 FROM TRUSTPILOT

Therapy via messaging, phone, or live video chat

- Great for a large network of licensed therapists
- Flexible cancellation at any time
- \$65 to 90/week, billed every 4 weeks



20% off your first month

LEARN MORE

hers

hers

4.6 (2.1K+) FROM App Store

Medication for anxiety and depression

- FDA-approved medication for anxiety and depression available
- Unlimited check-ins via online messaging
- \$49 to \$85/month, billed monthly

\$49 per month or less than \$2 per day.

[LEARN MORE](#)

talkspace

talkspace

4.8 (29.8k) FROM App Store

Combine therapy and prescription management

- Therapy via messaging, phone, or live video chat
- Psychiatry and prescription management available
- Covered members pay an average copay of \$30

Special Offer: \$85 off

[LEARN MORE](#)

Online-Therapy.com

Online-Therapy.com

4.7 (2.9k) FROM ONLINE-THERAPY.COM

Holistic programs with videos, journaling, and yoga

- Great for cognitive behavioral therapy
- Therapy via messaging, live video chat, and worksheets
- \$40 to \$88/week, billed monthly

20% off your first month

[LEARN MORE](#)

Eating Disorders ADHD / ADD

How we reviewed this article:

[SOURCES](#)

Share this article



RELATED COVERAGE

ADVERTISEMENT

What's to know about binge eating disorder?

Binge eating disorder involves times of uncontrolled eating, which then leads to unhappiness. Find out more about how to recognize

[READ MORE →](#)

ADHD in girls: How is it different?

A person with ADHD can have difficulty focusing, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Signs and symptoms may seem different in girls

[READ MORE →](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

What are the best diets for ADHD?

Medically reviewed by [Katherine Marengo LDN, R.D.](#)

Certain foods may help with the symptoms of ADHD, while others could worsen the condition. In this article, we look at which foods

[READ MORE →](#)

Tips and more to help curb binge eating

Medically reviewed by [Timothy J. Legg, PhD, PsyD](#)

There are many strategies to help curb binge eating, including identifying and removing triggers, planning meals, and reducing

[READ MORE →](#)

The signs of an eating disorder

The signs of an eating disorder vary depending on the condition, but they can include extreme food restriction, food rituals, and

[READ MORE →](#)



Get our newsletter

Keep up with the ever-changing world of medical science with new and emerging developments in health.

SUBSCRIBE

Your [privacy](#) is important to us

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Privacy Settings](#)

[Advertising Policy](#)

[Health Topics](#)

[Health Hubs](#)

[Medical Affairs](#)

[Content Integrity](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information](#)

© 2024 Healthline Media UK Ltd, Brighton, UK. All rights reserved. MNT is the registered trade mark of Healthline Media. Healthline Media is an RVO Health Company. Any medical information published on this website is not intended as a substitute for informed medical advice and you should not take any action before consulting with a healthcare professional. [See additional information.](#)

[About](#) | [Careers](#) | [Advertise with us](#)

OUR BRANDS [Healthline](#) [Medical News Today](#) [Greatist](#) [Psych Central](#) [Bezzly](#)