Binge Eating Disorder Treatment: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials


Binge eating disorder (BED) is marked by recurrent binge eating (such as rapid consumption and eating until uncomfortably full) in the absence of compensatory behaviors and by marked distress about the behavior. The estimated prevalence of BED ranges from 0.7 to 3.0 per 100 persons. Overweight and obesity are common comorbidities. BED may be associated with both medical and psychiatric conditions. Effective treatments are critically needed to target the core behavior of binge eating, as well as to reduce distress, improve psychological functioning, and promote weight loss goals in overweight individuals with BED.

Our study informed treatment for patients with BED by summarizing comparative data on the effectiveness and harms (negative side effects) of various therapies. In a systematic review of 19 published studies about medications, behavioral interventions, and combinations of these interventions, we determined that the strength of the evidence about the efficacy of some medication and behavioral interventions was moderate. Individual or group cognitive behavioral therapy reduced binge eating days or episodes and improved abstinence rates for up to 4 months after treatment. Certain second-generation antidepressants—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—may play a role in treating BED patients, but such medications do pose some risk of patient harm. Evidence was weak for self-help and other interventions.

In these studies, we found no evidence about different outcomes related to sociodemographic factors, but men and ethnic and racial minorities are not well represented in these studies. Many trials had high rates of patient dropout or placebo effects, so most conclusions about treatments for BED should be regarded with caution. High-priority directions for research include identifying optimal interventions that are associated with remission, sustained abstinence from binge eating, and permanent weight loss; studying a broader set of patients; and designing studies with adequate sample sizes and follow-up periods.

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