

CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS · 5.7

ADHD and Eating Disorders: An Under-Recognised Link

The link between ADHD and eating disorders is well documented but still under-recognised in clinical practice. Binge eating and bulimia in particular are strongly over-represented in adults with ADHD.

FOR

Adults with ADHD and disordered eating

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

17 May 2026

PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

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The link in plain terms

- **Around four times the odds of meeting criteria for any eating disorder.** The 2016 Nazar meta-analysis pooled 12 studies. Bulimia nervosa shows the strongest association (around six times more likely) and binge eating disorder is also strongly over-represented (around four times more likely). Anorexia nervosa is less strongly linked.
- **The link is stronger in women.** And stronger in clinically referred samples than in community samples. Female ADHD is more often inattentive on the surface, and the impulsivity driving binge eating is sometimes one of the few obviously impulsive features visible from outside.
- **Many people are diagnosed with the eating disorder first.** Years of treatment that helped but did not resolve the binge behaviour is a common adult pattern, with the ADHD identified later.

Why the two travel together

- **Impulsivity drives the binge.** ADHD difficulty with inhibiting urges and with delayed reward plays directly into the loss of control during binge episodes. Many people describe binges that begin with a clear intention not to binge and proceed anyway.
- **Interoceptive difficulty disrupts hunger and fullness signals.** ADHD is associated with reduced interoceptive accuracy. Forgetting to eat for long stretches followed by intense undirected evening eating is a recognisable pattern.
- **Emotional regulation feeds the cycle.** Eating becomes a coping mechanism for distress, boredom, frustration or anxiety. Emotional regulation difficulty is one of the core features of adult ADHD.
- **Reward and dopamine signalling are involved.** Highly palatable food produces a stronger dopamine response in brains with reduced baseline dopamine signalling. This is part of why ADHD brains are more vulnerable to the cycle.
- **ADHD medication can substantially improve binge eating.** Most UK adults with co-occurring ADHD and binge eating who start stimulant treatment see meaningful improvement in binge frequency and severity as part of the ADHD response.

What helps and where to start

- **Treat the most acutely dangerous condition first.** Significant medical compromise from an eating disorder is a medical priority and may need specialist eating disorder services before ADHD treatment. Anorexia with co-occurring ADHD is more complex; weight restoration usually precedes ADHD treatment.
- **ADHD-aware eating disorder treatment.** CBT-ED for binge eating delivered with awareness of ADHD often produces better outcomes than the off-the-shelf version. The structural components (mealtime regularity, food planning, environment design) are part of what makes it work.
- **Assessment is appropriate where the pattern fits.** NeuroFX offers private adult ADHD assessment, including a dedicated women's pathway where the female presentation is in play. We work alongside NHS eating disorder services where they are involved.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if you suspect ADHD alongside an eating disorder, particularly if standard eating disorder treatment has helped but not resolved the picture. UK eating disorder services are typically NHS-led; ADHD assessment can proceed via NHS, Right to Choose or private. For acute eating disorder concerns, Beat has a national helpline. Seek urgent help via 111, 999 or A&E for medical compromise or any acute mental health crisis.

SOURCES

NICE NG69; NICE NG87; Nazar et al. 2016 (Int J Eat Disord); Faraone et al. 2021 (Neurosci Biobehav Rev)

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

neurofx.co.uk · info@neurofx.co.uk · 0333 533 3303