From 'gluttony' to the medical mainstream: Is binge eating a disorder or simply an unhealthy habit?

Critics say claims of how many people have the newly redefined condition are inflated, meaning many may be treated with drugs that can cause serious side effects

By John Fauber

For generations, it was called "gluttony."

Then it was labeled binge-eating disorder, but not many people noticed. In the diagnostic manual used by psychiatrists, it was listed as a condition that needed further study.

In 2013, it went prime time.

That was when the American Psychiatric Association said it was a formal mental disorder and expanded — greatly — the definition psychiatrists use to diagnose it.

Previously, someone had to have out-of-control eating episodes at least twice a week for a period of six months. The new criteria said the episodes only had to occur once a week for three months.

What followed were claims that up to 8.5 million American adults have the condition; the approval of a dangerous amphetamine to treat it; and a marketing campaign complete with a celebrity spokeswoman — former tennis star Monica Seles.

Independent doctors argue binge-eating disorder is not a disease at all, but simply an unhealthy habit.

What’s more, those doctors say, the claims of how many people have the condition are inflated, meaning many may be diagnosed and overtreated with drugs that can cause serious side effects.

Allen Frances, the former chairman of psychiatry at Duke University, called binge-eating disorder a "fake diagnosis."

Frances was chairman of the task force that, in 1994, produced the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. That’s when binge-eating disorder was listed as a condition for research purposes, meaning it needed further study.

He’s a critic of the 2013 decision to elevate its status and broaden its definition in the latest edition of the manual.

"We shouldn’t be turning everyday behaviors into mental disorders," Frances said.
An overnight market

Experts say a change in the manual can mean several things.

First, it can create — overnight — a lucrative new market for drug companies.

It can make it easier to get insurance coverage for the new condition.

And it can add urgency for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to approve new products to treat it.

In 2015, the FDA approved the first drug for binge-eating disorder — Vyvanse, a dangerous amphetamine already in use to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

"Generally, the landscape has changed from a climate of wondering whether this unusual pattern of eating was a valid mental disorder to a discussion of how to best understand the causes of and develop treatments for this common and impairing condition," said James Hudson, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

Hudson was the lead author of a 2007 study that estimated nearly 7 million Americans had the condition under the old definition. The number was based on a large national household survey conducted by non-physicians between 2001 and 2003.

The survey has not been updated using the new definition.

Therefore, the estimates vary widely and may use different assumptions to reach a number. The Office of Women's Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates 4 million Americans have binge-eating disorder. On the other end of the spectrum, a 2014 online doctor education course claimed it affected more than 8.5 million Americans.

The course was funded by Shire, the company that manufactures Vyvanse, which remains the only drug approved to treat the condition.

In an email, Carlos Grilo, a professor of psychiatry and psychology at Yale University School of Medicine and faculty leader for the online course, said that number was a "very reasonable estimate (perhaps too conservative)."

Grilo, who has been a Shire consultant, said the estimate takes into account the new definition, the increased incidence of obesity and a greater willingness of people to disclose they have the problem.

Psychiatrist B. Timothy Walsh, who chaired the working group that created the new definition, noted that psychiatry does not have physical tests that can confirm a diagnosis.

For instance, an EKG can confirm a suspected heart attack. With binge-eating disorder, doctors must rely on what the patient tells them.

"I wish there was a blood test for binge-eating disorder," said Walsh, a professor psychiatry at Columbia University.

Concerns over use of drug

Even some of those who support the new definition, such as Walsh, express concerns about the long-term safety of Vyvanse to treat it.

The FDA approved Vyvanse for binge-eating disorder despite misgivings and concerns raised by its own doctors. Those
doctors noted that while Vyvanse is not approved for weight loss, many people with binge-eating disorder are obese, and may be tempted to use it to lose weight.

Cardiovascular safety of the drug has never been established.

Testing for cardiovascular safety only can be established in longer clinical trials that measure heart attacks and strokes, something not done with Vyvanse. In fact, the trials were short, just three months, and excluded people who were at higher risk for heart problems, including those with high blood pressure and diabetes.

Vyvanse is known to raise blood pressure and heart rate and the drug’s label warns that those measures should be considered before prescribing it. The drug carries the FDA’s most stringent warning because of its high potential for causing dependence and abuse. It also can cause psychotic and manic symptoms. There also have been reports of heart attacks, strokes and sudden deaths.

In an email, Shire spokesman Charlie Catalano said Vyvanse is proven to be effective when used as prescribed by a licensed, trained health care professional and noted those with binge-eating disorder "have very real medical needs."

Critics say the level of effectiveness of the drug is questionable.

In clinical trials, Vyvanse was tested against a placebo in patients who had, on average, nearly five binge-eating days per week. In those trials, the drug reduced the binge-eating days by 3.9 per week

But the placebo reduced the binge-eating days by about 2.5 per week.