

Body and Soul
Life of the party
By DEBRA TAYLOR

Do you shop like you're a Hilton sister? Party like Britney? You could be a binge-aholic, says Debra Taylor, and your excesses could be making you sick.

It's a tradition most Aussies hold dear - the charge to the pub at beer o'clock on a Friday afternoon. But what happens if Friday night beers become Friday night bingeing? A 2002 report from Perth's National Drug Research Institute claimed Australia was a nation of binge drinkers with 67 per cent drinking at dangerous levels. And it's not just alcohol. Binge or social smoking is of growing concern to anti-smoking campaigners.

Meanwhile, the University of Melbourne is looking into binge shopping. Binge eating, of course, has long been under the scientific and psychological microscopes. Even over-exercising can be cause for concern. And while a few too many beers or a little retail therapy may seem harmless, it might be forming patterns that are gratifying in the short term, but damaging long term.

"It's hard to find someone who hasn't binged on something at some time," says Sydney psychologist Dr Lissa Johnson. One of the main causes is denying yourself something, and then "falling down". "If people are very restrictive in how they go about things they tend to be vulnerable to bingeing, because, once they break that rule they think 'What the hell?'" she says.

It's the pattern Ray Horsburgh, 47, found himself in when he decided to quit smoking. Ray admits he would binge smoke when he was in the pub. "I'd have a few drinks because I knew it would be easier to have a cigarette and not feel guilty about it," he says. Afterwards, he would feel "devastated" and promise himself he wouldn't smoke again. Next time he was in the pub, however, the temptation was too great. "It took me a long time, but I finally gave up."

One of the reasons bingeing is so hard to stop is that it is commonly used as an emotional crutch, says Dr Johnson. "Bingeing is a way of escaping self-focus," she says. "People are under a very critical microscope these days and they feel they can lose themselves in eating, drinking, shopping or whatever and numb out."

Of course, there's also habit - what else would you do on a Friday night if beer o'clock didn't come around? But breaking your bingeing habits might be simpler than you think. "Rather than saving up your pleasure for the weekend, make it a priority to do pleasurable things throughout the week," says Dr Johnson. And don't be too hard on yourself. Moderation is often a better way to go than obliteration.

Exercise

* myth "If I exercise every day, I will be really fit and strong"

* reality "The idea with exercise is to increment the load and give the body periods of recovery and adapting," says Kenneth Graham, NSW Institute of Sport sports science manager. Exercising without allowing your body any down time may actually erode your fitness level, rather than increasing it. "If you build up too high, you will feel worse and worse," says Graham.

And if you are trying to burn off kilojoules as you eat them, it could be a sign of an over focus on your body and shape. "One way of getting out of that purge and bingeing cycle is to challenge your own thinking about weight, shape and size," says Dr Johnson. "We often think we need to be thin and beautiful, but ask yourself, is it only these people who are happy?"

Smoking

* myth "I'm a social smoker, it's not as bad for you and I can give it up anytime."

* reality check Wake up and smell the tobacco. There is no healthy level of smoking, plus binge or social smokers are likely to develop a regular habit. Fortunately, the fact binge smoking is linked to pubs and drinking means you can easily identify triggers.

"Bars and pubs are nicotine classrooms that increase the amount social smokers smoke," says Dr Melanie Wakefield from Cancer Council Victoria. Her research into social smoking found that seven out of 10 social smokers binge when they're out. "Social situations - especially those that involve alcohol - are a common relapse trigger for smokers who are trying to quit," says Dr Wakefield. "Adding bars and pubs to the growing list of smoke-free public places would help."

Eating

* myth "I have to cut out all the things I love if I'm ever going to get thin."

* reality check "Binge eating is really the problem of an affluent western culture," says Trent Watson, a dietitian associated with the Dietitians Association of Australia. "And emotion is a big factor; if something hasn't gone well people have a blow out. Food, and particularly sugar, gratifies us and gives us a lot of pleasure."

Once again, our obsession with body shape and size is unhealthy. "There are studies that find men prefer women a size larger than women think they do," points out Dr Johnson. If, however, you are worried about comfort eating or a dietary blow out, there are ways to avoid it. "Preparation and organisation is the key," says Watson. If you limit your choices by packing your own food, you are less likely to reach for the Tim Tams. "So, no matter what happens in your day, the only food available is healthy."

Drinking

* myth "A once-a-week blow out is fine."

* reality check "People often ask me if they can save up their alcohol allowance and drink it all at once," says Paul Dillon, media and information officer for Sydney's National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. "But putting a whole pile of alcohol into your system is more damaging in both the long and short term." Young people are more likely to binge as they often aren't concerned about long term problems such as liver damage.

But Dillon urges people to look at short-term consequences such as spiked drinks, violence and sexual assault. "It isn't about not having a good time, but there's a big difference between a good time and a dangerous time," says Dillon. So, how can you avoid the Friday night blowout? "Your first drink should be non-alcoholic, preferably water, because that's the one you drink quickly," he says. Also, eat before you go out (or have alcohol with a meal) and have a non-alcoholic drink between each tipple.

Shopping

* myth "You can't have too many pairs of shoes."

* reality check "Many binge shoppers strive for perfection and want to present themselves as well as possible," says University Of Melbourne associate professor Michael Kyrios, who specialises in compulsive behaviour. "Shoes, for example, are something people notice and comment on, as are clothes and make-up."

And binge shoppers aren't good decision makers. "Rather than make a bad decision, they err on the side of buying," says associate professor Kyrios. Next comes the high, then the guilt, and, finally, the return of the item. So, if you have a tendency to max out the credit card, there are some simple measures you can take. "Be more structured in your shopping, have a list of things you need to get and go straight to those shops," says Kyrios. And, of course, leave the plastic at home. Most importantly, try to understand the triggers that send you off on a budgetary blow out.