

Body image and diets

Your body image is how you think and feel about your body. Body image involves your perception, imagination and emotions. It does not necessarily reflect what you see in the mirror or what other people see. Poor body image is often linked to dieting or eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia and binge eating and to other mental health issues such as depression or anxiety.

Many people try a lot of different diets that do not work. Some people diet because they have a poor body image, rather than because they want to be a healthy weight. While it's important to maintain healthy eating behaviours, constant dieting can lead to physical illness and depression, especially if your weight goes up and down after dieting.

Some people think they are overweight

Some people think they are overweight when they are not. Here are some statistics:

- 45 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men in the healthy weight range think they are overweight.
- At least 20 per cent of women who are underweight think that they are overweight and are dieting to lose weight.
- Body image has some cultural links – for example, some research shows that Asian women, after moving to Australia, take on body image and diet habits that are not common in their own countries.

Weight loss from diets does not last

Australians spend up to one million dollars a day on fad diets that have little effect on their weight. Even if you remain on a weight loss program, it is likely that you will regain:

- One to two-thirds of your lost weight within one year
- Nearly all of your lost weight or more within five years.

Dieting affects your health and your mental state

Women who diet frequently are more likely to:

- Binge eat
- Purge food (vomit)
- Restrict food intake too much and not get the nutrients they require for good health
- Over exercise
- Have poor health
- Become depressed or anxious
- Develop an eating disorder.

The weight loss seesaw

Research has shown that nearly every young woman and nearly half of all middle-aged women have dieted to lose weight at least once. The 'weight loss, weight gain' seesaw may put you at risk of heart disease and other health problems. Some studies have shown that just one cycle of weight loss and weight gain is a risk factor for the development of heart disease later in life. People who diet frequently have a much higher risk of developing eating disorders.

If you are concerned about your own or your child's weight, consult with your doctor, paediatrician or dietitian.

Women need fat on their hips and thighs

It is normal for women to have fat on their hips and thighs. Frequent dieting will not remove this fat. It is vital for:

- Fertility and breastfeeding
- Prevention of osteoporosis
- Healthy skin, eyes, hair and teeth.

Men also worry about their body image

Men are under increasing pressure to have an ideal body:

- 17 per cent of men are on some sort of fad diet.
- An increasing number of men are undergoing cosmetic surgery.
- More men are buying grooming products and cosmetics than ever before.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia, Tel. 1800 812 942
- Paediatrician
- Psychologist or counsellor
- Eating Disorders Victoria Helpline (03) 9885 0318 or 1300 550 236

Things to remember

- Our body image may not be accurate. Many people think they are overweight/underweight when they are not.
- If you diet, you will almost certainly gain any weight lost back again once you stop dieting.
- Frequent dieting affects your health and can make you depressed.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Eating Disorders Victoria (EDV)

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