

Body image - men

Your body image is what you think you look like. This may have little relationship at all with your actual appearance. Around one in four Australian men in the healthy weight range believe themselves to be fat, while 17 per cent of men are on a weight loss diet at any given time. Men also worry about being muscular. A desire to fit the ideal masculine image of lean muscularity means that over-exercising and the use of dangerous and illegal drugs (like steroids) are on the rise.

It's estimated that about 45 per cent of Western men are unhappy with their bodies to some degree, compared with only 15 per cent some 25 years ago. Gay men, models, dancers and athletes are particularly vulnerable to poor body image or feeling insecure about their bodies. This is because they are more likely to be judged (or believe they will be judged) according to their appearance.

Self-destructive behaviours

A negative body image encourages a range of self-destructive behaviours, including:

- **Fad dieting** – around 17 per cent of men are dieting at any given time. Those diets are not always nutritionally sound.
- **Eating disorders** – one in 10 people with anorexia nervosa is now male, while 4 per cent of men are purging (vomiting or exercising compulsively, also known as bulimia) and about 3 per cent of men have problems with binge eating.
- **Exercise dependence** – around 20 per cent of regular exercisers (approximately 5 per cent of the population) are addicted to exercise, either psychologically or physically.
- **Steroid abuse** – around 3 per cent of Australian teenage boys use muscle enhancing drugs (like steroids).

A range of causes

Some of the factors that contribute to a negative body image include:

- Teasing in childhood and adolescence (for being too thin, too weak or too fat).
- Peer pressure among teenage boys to be tough and strong.
- A cultural tendency to judge people on their appearance.
- The emphasis on male sports players as role models for boys.
- Advertising campaigns and media coverage featuring idealised male images.
- Promotion by society of the ideal man as always being strong, lean and muscular
- Well-meaning public health campaigns that urge people to lose weight.

The figures could be higher

Most experts believe the real figures on eating and exercise disorders among Australian men could be much higher. Men are less likely to seek medical help than women for any type of illness. Since worrying about weight and body shape has sometimes been seen as a 'female' problem, men are even less likely to ask for help, for fear of looking weak and effeminate.

Healthier choices

A negative body image develops over the course of your life, so changing it can take time and effort. Suggestions on improving your body image include:

- Reflect on your experiences and try to unravel the influences on your body image from childhood.
- Try weighing yourself less often. Focus on health not weight.
- Make a pact with yourself to treat your body with respect, which includes eating well and not embarking on punishing exercise routines, or taking drugs.
- Try to strike a healthy balance between being concerned about how your body looks rather than the way it functions.
- Get informed by reading up on body image issues.
- Develop a range of reasons for exercising (such as stress release or improved concentration), rather than concentrating only on changing your body shape.

Type of help available

If you are feeling depressed about your body, or if you are developing destructive behaviours (like crash dieting, binge eating or compulsive exercising), then professional help is a good idea. There are counsellors and psychologists, trained in the areas of body image, who can help you change negative beliefs and behaviours.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Counsellor
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia, tel. 1800 812 942
- Eating Disorders Victoria Helpline (03) 9885 0318 or 1300 550 236

Things to remember

- Body image is the way you perceive, think and feel about your body.
- Poor body image is a male problem too, with around half of all men feeling unhappy with their body shape or size.
- Figures on male anorexia, bulimia and exercise dependence could be much higher than quoted, since men are traditionally reluctant to seek medical help.

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

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