
Body image and diets

Summary

- Your body image is how you think and feel about your body.
 - Your body image may not be accurate. Many people think they are overweight or underweight when they are not.
 - Poor body image is often linked to dieting, over-exercising, or eating disorders.
 - Frequent dieting can affect your mental and physical health.
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Your body image is how you think and feel about your body. Body image involves your thoughts, perceptions, 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**, over-exercising, or **eating disorders** such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder, and to other mental health issues such as low self-esteem, depression or anxiety.

Poor body image or body dissatisfaction can also result from comparing your body with what society and the media tell you is the ideal body size and shape. The perceived body ideal can vary over time and between cultures. Some research shows that, after moving to Australia, some women from other countries take on body image and diet habits that are not common in their country of origin.

Some people diet because they have a poor body image, rather than because they want to eat nutritionally well, or be in a healthy weight range. 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.

It is well documented that even 'moderate' dieting increases the risk of developing an eating disorder. Dieting or restrictive eating can also lead to preoccupation with thoughts about food.

Body image and weight issues

Some people think they are overweight when they are not. For example:

- Among people within the healthy weight range, women are three times more likely than men to believe that they are overweight.
- Of teenagers within a healthy weight range, 10 per cent of females and three per cent of males think that they are overweight.
- At least 20 per cent of women who are underweight think that they are overweight and are dieting to lose weight.

Weight loss from dieting does not last

A 2017 national survey of 1,033 Australians aged 18--64 years found that 46 per cent of adults had actively tried to lose weight in the past year.

Yet, research shows that dieting for weight loss is not effective in the longer term, and may actually be associated with weight regain. In some cases, people may regain more than they lost through dieting.

This '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.

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

Dieting affects your health and mental state

Women who diet frequently are more likely to:

- binge eat
- purge food (vomit) or misuse laxatives
- restrict food intake too much and not get the nutrients they require for good health
- over-exercise
- have poor physical health
- become depressed or anxious
- develop an eating disorder
- become preoccupied with food.

Women need a layer of protective fat

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

Body image affects men as well as women. Research suggests that 11 per cent of Australian males aged over 15 years have dieted to lose weight in the last year. And increasing numbers of teenage boys and men are engaged in muscle-building to achieve the male muscular ideal through body building and use of **steroids** (also known as image and performance enhancing drugs) or protein supplements.

Where to get help

- Your GP
- Maternal and child health nurse
- **Maternal and child health line** 13 22 29
- **Dietitians Association of Australia** Tel. 1800 812 942
- Paediatrician
- Psychologist or counsellor
- Dietitian
- **Eating Disorders Victoria** Helpline Tel. 1300 550 236
- **WIRE women's helpline** Tel. 1300 134 130
- Exercise physiologist

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

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