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## Body image - men

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### Summary

- Your body image is how you think and feel about your body.
  - It does not necessarily reflect what you see in the mirror or what other people see.
  - Poor body image is not just a female issue - many men are also dissatisfied with their body image.
  - Poor body image in men can be linked to dieting, over-exercising, eating disorders and steroid abuse.
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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 may have little to do with your actual appearance. Although body image issues have traditionally been thought of as a women's health concern, they can affect people of all ages and genders.

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 often results from comparing your body with what the media tells you is the ideal male body size and shape - namely, lean and muscular. It is not uncommon for men with body dissatisfaction to be focussed on weight loss and muscle building, which can lead to over-exercising and the use of image enhancing drugs.

Studies suggest that around 11 per cent of Australian men are on a weight loss diet at any given time, and it is thought that around one third of people with an eating disorder are male (although it is likely that this is under-reported).

It is thought that certain male groups, such as young men, gay men, athletes, body builders, models and dancers, among others, may be particularly vulnerable to poor body image or feeling insecure about their bodies. This is because they are more likely to be in situations where they may be judged (or believe they will be judged) according to their weight and appearance.

### Body image and self-destructive behaviours in men

A negative body image is a risk factor for a range of self-destructive behaviours, such as:

- fad dieting - around 11 per cent of Australian men are dieting at any given time. Those diets are not always nutritionally sound
- disordered eating - around one third of people with an eating disorder are male
- exercise dependence or 'exercise addiction'
- steroid abuse - young men, gay men, elite athletes, competitive bodybuilders, men who train with weights, and security guards are some of the male groups most at risk of using performance and image enhancing drugs to promote muscle growth or reduce body fat.

### Causes of negative body image in men

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

- teasing in childhood and adolescence (being called too thin, too weak or too fat)
  - peer pressure among teenage boys to be physically '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
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- 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.

### **Improving your body image**

A negative body image may have developed 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 identify the influences on your body image from childhood.
- Try weighing or 'body-checking' (pinching, measuring, mirror-checking) yourself less often. Focus on health and vitality, not weight, size and shape.
- Make a pact with yourself to treat your body with respect, which includes eating well and not embarking on punishing exercise routines, fad diets or taking drugs.
- Try to shift to a healthier focus of how your body functions and consider all your body helps you do in life, rather than just focusing on how your body looks.
- Get informed by reading up on body image issues.
- Develop reasons for exercising that are not focused on your body's appearance (such as stress release, vitality or improved concentration), rather than concentrating only on changing your body shape.

### **Help for body image issues**

If your mood is being affected by how you feel about your body, you are noticing that you are overly focused on 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 to change negative beliefs and behaviours.

### **Where to get help**

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Counsellor**
- **Psychologist**
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. **1800 55 1800**
- **MensLine Australia** Tel. **1300 78 99 78**
- **Dietitians Association of Australia** Tel. **1800 812 942**
- **Eating Disorders Victoria** Helpline Tel. **1300 550 236**
- **Butterfly Foundation for Eating Disorders** Tel. **1800 33 4673**

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