Body image and diets
Summary

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

References

• Aussies wasting time and money on fad diets, 2017, Dietitians Association of Australia. More information here.

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Healthy mind

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Healthy mind basics
- Healthy thinking
- Healthy mind throughout life
- Identity and relationships
- Getting help
- Goals, tips and tools
- Relaxation and alternative therapies
- Health conditions and mental health

Healthy mind basics

Exercise and mental health

We all know how important exercise is for keeping us physically healthy. But did you know that exercise can also help keep you mentally healthy? Research shows that people who exercise regularly have...
Exercise and mood

Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it's important to keep up an exercise...

It's okay to feel sad

Sadness is a feeling that everyone experiences. It is part of life. We can respond to our sadness in ways that help us feel better...

Monitoring your mood

Most people know when they are feeling ‘in a mood’. But do you know what ‘mood’ means? Or where your mood comes from? Or how to change your mood? Understanding your moods may help you work out what...

Mood and sleep

Getting enough sleep is vital. Long term sleep deficiency can affect your mood. You can improve your sleep quality...

Talking through problems

Kids and teenagers may be worried that adults won't take their feelings seriously...

Talking to health professionals about mental health issues

Talking with a doctor or healthcare professional about your mental health issues will help you to feel comfortable and get the most appropriate treatment for your needs...

Healthy thinking

Assertiveness

It is helpful to imagine assertiveness as the middle ground between aggression and passivity...

Exercise and mood

Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise...

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

Worrying can be constructive if it helps you to work out possible solutions to a problem, but some people are troubled by excessive anxiety...

It's okay to feel sad

Sadness is a feeling that everyone experiences. It is part of life. We can respond to our sadness in ways that help us feel better...

Look after your health at harvest time

Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness...

Negative emotions

Negative emotions can dampen our enthusiasm for life, depending on how long we let them affect us...

Rural issues - coping with stress

The effort of trying to provide for the family and keep the farm going can be intensely stressful...

Rural issues - suggestions for families in crisis

Financial hardship can increase the risk of workplace accidents on a farm...

Self esteem

Low self-esteem can be remedied but it takes attention and daily practice...

Self-harm and self-injury

Self-harm and self-injury is when people hurt themselves on purpose, usually in response to intense emotional pain or negative feelings, thoughts or memories...

Stress

Stress affects people in different ways, but a balanced lifestyle can help you manage everyday stress...

Stress busters

Stress can affect your health and your life, so you need to know effective ways of dealing with your stress...

Strong relationships, strong health
Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links...

- Talking through problems
  Kids and teenagers may be worried that adults won't take their feelings seriously...

**Healthy mind throughout life**

- Bullying
  Parents can help with bullying by supporting their child and involving the authorities to find solutions.

- Christmas can be stressful
  The expense of gifts and food, the pressure of shopping, and the expectations of the season can make Christmas an extremely stressful time.

- Exercise and mood
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it's important to keep up an exercise...

- Healthy ageing - stay involved
  Reach out to the world around you for fun, a sense of achievement, social contact and mental stimulation.

- Healthy ageing - stay mentally active
  Researchers believe that many of the supposed age-related changes affecting the mind, such as memory loss, are actually lifestyle related.

- Holiday stress
  Holidays are supposed to offer relaxation and recuperation, but some people find them disappointingly stressful.

- How to volunteer and boost your health
  Volunteering is great for our health – it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process.

- Internet safety for children
  A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints.

- Meditation [infographic]
  Mindfulness meditation has a range of benefits and can help clear your mind.

- Pregnancy and your mental health
  Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn’t stop when the baby...

- Secrets to healthy ageing
  Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

- Strong relationships, strong health
  Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

- Tertiary studies - managing stress
  Stress is a common issue for all tertiary students, but there are lots of ways to manage your stress.

- Tertiary studies - mature age students
  Returning to study as a mature age student presents many challenges and rewards.

- Workplace conflict
  A clash of personalities at work is bad for business, because it can affect productivity and increase absenteeism.

- Work-related stress
  Work-related stress causes an increase in sick days and absenteeism, a higher turnover of staff and a drop in productivity.

- Year 12 exams - managing stress
  Help your child manage stress during exams by getting them to use good study habits, eat well, exercise, relax, sleep and keep things in perspective.

**Identity and relationships**
• Anger - how it affects people
Well-managed anger can be a useful emotion that motivates you to make positive changes.

• Anger - tips to resolve arguments
There are many people you can talk to who can help you overcome feelings of wanting to lash out.

• Body image and diets
Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight.

• Body image and young people - staying positive (video)
The pressure on young girls and boys to be physically perfect is creating an epidemic of children and teenagers with low self-esteem and negative body image. Reporter Flip Shelton introduces us to the...

• Body image - men
Homosexual men and athletes are particularly vulnerable to poor body image or feeling insecure about their bodies.

• Body image – tips for parents
Give your child opportunities to appreciate their body for what it can do, rather than what it looks like.

• Body image - women
The urge to diet or use other dangerous weight loss methods is almost always prompted by feeling unhappy with body shape or size.

• Family conflict
It is normal to disagree with each other from time to time and occasional conflict is part of family life.

• Is my body normal? (Boys)
Boys’ bodies come in all shapes and sizes. As you get older, and go through puberty, you become more aware of your body and how it compares with others. Boys’ bodies come in all shapes and sizes.

• Is my body normal? (Girls)
Puberty is a time when your body goes through lots of changes. It’s wonderful and exciting, and can sometimes feel overwhelming. This is the time your body changes from being a girl into being a woman.

• Making friends
Friendships are an important part of life, but many of us find it difficult to find, make or keep friends.

• Peer pressure
Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager’s life.

• Strong relationships, strong health
Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links.

Getting help

• Cognitive behaviour therapy
Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help you change unhelpful or unhealthy habits of thinking, feeling and behaving.

• Counsellors
Anyone who is struggling with a personal concern can seek help from a counsellor.

• Fighting your fears
Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

• It's okay to feel sad
Sadness is a feeling that everyone experiences. It is part of life. We can respond to our sadness in ways that help us feel better.

• Mental health problems - early care helps
If emotional or behavioural problems are disrupting your life, it's important to seek professional help early.

• Pregnancy and your mental health
Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going...
Psychoanalysis
Psychoanalysis is a treatment based on the theory that our present is shaped by our past.

Strong relationships, strong health
Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links:

Talking through problems
Kids and teenagers may be worried that adults won't take their feelings seriously.

Talking to health professionals about mental health issues
Talking with a doctor or healthcare professional about your mental health issues will help you to feel comfortable and get the most appropriate treatment for your needs.

Goals, tips and tools

10 tips for being assertive
Practise speaking in an assertive voice.

10 tips to improve your mental fitness
The brain is like a muscle – if you don’t give it a regular workout, it loses tone. Here are some tips to help you improve your mental fitness: Exercise for 30 minutes every day. Physical health.

10 tips to raise an optimistic child
Be a positive role model.

10 tips to stay mentally healthy
Take a few tips to improve your health and wellbeing.

Fighting your fears
Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

How to volunteer and boost your health
Volunteering is great for our health – it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process.

Laughter clubs (video)
Laughter has some great health benefits such as boosting your immune system, lowering your blood pressure and reducing stress.

Meditation [infographic]
Mindfulness meditation has a range of benefits and can help clear your mind.

Pregnancy and your mental health
Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn’t stop when the baby.

Relaxation and alternative therapies

Alexander technique
The Alexander technique stresses that movement should be economical and needs only the minimum amount of energy and effort.

Aromatherapy
The different smells and chemical constituents of aromatherapy oils can produce different emotional and physiological reactions.

Breathing to reduce stress
Many people use controlled breathing to help promote relaxation and reduce the effects of stress.

Fighting your fears
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Laughter clubs (video)
Laughter has some great health benefits such as boosting your immune system, lowering your blood pressure and reducing stress.

- **Meditation**
  Meditation techniques can promote a sense of calm and heightened awareness.

- **Meditation [infographic]**
  Mindfulness meditation has a range of benefits and can help clear your mind.

- **Pilates and yoga - health benefits**
  Yoga and Pilates both improve muscular and postural strength.

- **Pregnancy and your mental health**
  Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn’t stop when the baby.

**Health conditions and mental health**

- **Alcohol and drugs - dependence and addiction**
  Asking for help when you first suspect you have an alcohol or drug problem is important. If you think you have an addiction, speak to your local doctor or phone Directline...

- **Anxiety disorders**
  Anxiety disorders are common mental health problems that affect many people.

- **Dementia explained**
  Dementia is not a normal part of ageing and can happen to anybody.

- **Depression explained**
  The most important thing is to recognise the signs and symptoms and seek support.

- **Eating disorders**
  Eating disorders are a mental illness and can affect women and men of all age groups.

- **Exercise and mood**
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise.

- **Fighting your fears**
  Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

- **Mental illness explained**
  The relationship between stress and mental illness is complex, but it is known that stress can worsen an episode of mental illness.

- **Postnatal depression (PND)**
  Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset.

**Related Information**

- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

- **Asthma explained**
  Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

- **Nutrition Week**
  Nutrition Week.

- **Body image – tips for parents**
  Give your child opportunities to appreciate their body for what it can do, rather than what it looks like.
Home

Related information on other websites
- Butterfly Foundation for Eating Disorders
- Centre for Excellence in Eating Disorders
- Dietitians Association of Australia
- Eating Disorders Victoria

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