

POSITION STATEMENT

April 2009



The following statement is the Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria's (EDV) current position on the use of ultra-thin fashion models and beauty pageant contestants.

In the current fashion climate, fashion models and beauty contest entrants, with few exceptions, are thin and tall. In some instances this is taken to the extreme, and we see both men and women selected for fashion shows and beauty contests who are dangerously thin or even emaciated.

EDV strongly condemns the acceptance and use of dangerously or unhealthily thin models and contestants, both for the negative impact this may have on the body image of viewers and because of the health risk to the model or contestant.

Eating Disorders Victoria believes that organisers of fashion shows and beauty pageants have a responsibility to ensure that models and pageant contestants are healthy and reflect a healthy image to potentially vulnerable viewers. In cases where BMI is below that recommended by experts as the minimum for normal health, or where thinness or muscle wastage is a potential concern, EDV believes the organisers should exercise their duty of care, refer the model or contestant for medical assessment and require a certificate of health before allowing them to participate.

EDV takes the position that it is irresponsible for any public event to promote unhealthily thin body types as desirable.

The prevailing view of beauty, particularly in Western culture, is already heavily skewed towards an idealised shape and thinness which is unattainable for most men and women. This 'pursuit of the unattainable' has clear negative impacts on the mental health, self-esteem and well-being of many people, especially our younger generation. Any imagery which portrays extreme thinness as desirable can only serve to further distort this view,

EDV believes that it is imperative for fashion shows and beauty pageants to portray only women and men of healthy body size and weight. EDV urges these industries to set a positive example by changing to using women and men who are more diverse in body shape, size, colour and culture.

EDV advocates for fashion show and beauty pageant organisers to promote good health practices among models and contestants by encouraging them to maintain their weight and body shape within a healthy range, encouraging appropriate eating and providing adequate opportunities for such, and by discouraging unhealthy weight-loss behaviours.

FAQ - Should dangerously thin models and contestants be weighed and/or banned from participating on the basis of low BMI?

It is important to identify models and contestants who are dangerously or unhealthily thin, underweight and/or who are engaging in eating disordered behaviour, and to assist these people to obtain professional assessment and treatment. EDV recognises that most people who are selected for modelling careers and beauty pageants are naturally thin; however this should not be used as a reason for dismissing concerns.

There are many warning signs which may indicate a person is at risk of developing an eating disorder, of which low Body Mass Index (BMI) is just one. Where a person's health and wellbeing may be in danger, EDV supports strong positive action to protect that person. Since extreme dieting and weight loss behaviours are more common in people associated with the fashion and beauty industry, event organisers have a responsibility to be aware of key warning signs including low BMI, emaciated appearance (often indicating muscle wastage) and behavioural indicators, and to take appropriate action wherever health may be in doubt. Appropriate action may include a request for a medical assessment or certificate of health from a GP, and, in some instances, exclusion from an event.

Responsible Portrayal of Body Image – Guidelines and Recommendations for the Fashion, Advertising and Media Industries

- a. Include people of diverse and varying size, weights and body types in all fashion industry events and related media publications. Diversity encourages acceptance.
- b. Ensure fashion models are healthy. In cases where weight is a potential concern, exercise your duty of care and do not use the model.

EDV strongly condemns the use of dangerously thin or underweight models, both for the negative impact this may have on body image and because of the health risk to the model.

- c. Cease the use of computer enhancement and digital photo manipulation to artificially slim and unrealistically alter body images in print media. If image altering has been used at all, it should be kept to an absolute minimum (eg red eye reduction, background lightening) and it should be clearly stated that image altering has occurred, alongside or beneath the advertisement.
- d. Fashion should be modelled only by age-appropriate models. Do not use children under the age of 16 to model clothes which are intended for adults or to be alluring to the opposite sex.

EDV endorses the decision made by some Australian fashion shows not to use models under the age of 16 on the cat-walk in adult fashion events.

- e. EDV strongly recommends that all employees of Australian fashion, advertising and media organisations (including modelling agencies) are provided with education programs to develop a greater understanding of body image issues, and the impact and role of negative body image on mental health.
- f. It is also recommended that the fashion, advertising and media industries acquaint themselves with the EDV *Guidelines for Reporting on Eating Disorders*, as inappropriate coverage in this area may cause serious harm. Eating disorders must be covered in a careful and responsible manner in order to avoid inadvertently or deliberately glamorising the illness and provoking experimentation with these life-threatening behaviours.