

Body image - women

Your body image is how you perceive, think and feel about your body. This may have no bearing at all on your actual appearance. For instance, it is common in Western nations for women to believe they are larger and fatter than they really are. Only one in five women are satisfied with their body weight. Nearly half of all normal weight women overestimate their size and shape. A distorted body image can lead to self-destructive behaviour, like dieting or binge eating. Approximately nine out of 10 young Australian women have dieted at least once in their lives.

Self-destructive behaviour

A poor body image can promote an unhealthy lifestyle. The urge to diet or use other potentially dangerous weight loss methods (such as fasting, smoking or laxatives) is almost always prompted by feeling unhappy with body shape or size. It is well documented that even 'moderate' dieting increases the risk of developing an eating disorder among girls. If a woman feels self-conscious about her appearance, she may avoid exercising because it might mean exposing her body shape to the public eye. Alternatively, she might over exercise in a bid to lose weight quickly. Some studies indicate that a young woman's body image is the single largest influence on her self-esteem. If she thinks she looks unattractive or fat, her self-confidence drops and this can impact on other areas of her life.

A range of causes

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

- Being teased about appearance in childhood
- Growing up with dieting parents, or one who was unhappy with their body shape
- A cultural tendency to judge people by their appearance
- Peer pressure among teenage girls to be slim, go on diets and compare themselves with others
- Media and advertising images promoting thinness as the ideal
- A tendency in women's media to push fad diets and weight loss programs
- Well-meaning public health campaigns that urge people to lose weight.

Healthier choices

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

- Reflect on your experiences and try to unravel the development of your body image from childhood.
- Talk about feelings and experiences with other women who have similar concerns.
- Make a pact with yourself to treat your body with respect, which includes giving it enough food and rest.
- Give yourself a break from women's magazines and the mass media for a while.
- Try some form of physical activity purely for the fun of it, not as a means of weight loss.
- Stop weighing yourself.
- Change your goal from weight loss to improving your health.
- Get informed by reading up on body image issues.

Type of help available

If you feel depressed about your body, or if you start bingeing or fasting, then professional help is a good idea. There are counsellors and psychologists trained in the areas of body image who can guide you in changing negative beliefs and behaviours. A chronic crash dieter might need assistance from a dietitian or psychologist to introduce healthier ways of eating and of relating to and caring for your body.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Counsellor
- The Eating Disorders Foundation Victoria Tel. (03) 9885 0318 non metro callers Tel. 1300 550 236

Things to remember

- Your body image is how you perceive, think and feel about your body.
- Most Australian women think they are larger and fatter than they actually are.
- A negative body image is formed over a lifetime from many different influences, including family, peer group, media and social pressures.

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

Eating Disorders Victoria (EDV)

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