

Males and Body Image: "Weighing In" on a Growing Concern¹

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Previous research has shown that gender has a relationship to body image and eating disorders, with females suffering more than males. Although they have lower rates of these disorders, males are not as protected from body image issues as was once thought. More and more males are struggling with body dissatisfaction, weight concerns, and feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to the societal ideal. Although these issues may manifest differently than they do in females, body image is becoming a point of concern for an increasing number of males, both young and old.

Males and Body Image

Male body image concerns usually result from external pressures to conform to a specific "body-builder" physique: broad shoulders, V-shaped back, and a muscular body. Men receive these pressures from the media's definition of masculinity and/or from teasing and expectations from family and friends. Comparing their own bodies with the media ideal may cause many males to become dissatisfied with their bodies. Men are bombarded with media images of superheroes, action figures, and bodybuilders, all of which suggest that they should

work towards having dense and muscular bodies. Family members and friends can also be the source of destructive information. Teasing and unrealistic expectations often cause males to seek to modify their bodies.



Research has shown that even moderate exposure to these types of messages can have a negative impact on male body image (Lorenzen, Grieve & Thomas, 2004). Most men who are dissatisfied with their bodies do not wish to become thinner, but desire to develop muscle mass. For males, the pressure to gain muscle is a greater predictor of body dissatisfaction and weight-changing behaviors than the pressure to lose weight (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Lillis, & Thomas, 2006).

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1. This document is FCS8849, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published July 2007. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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Males, Eating Disorders, and Other Extreme Behaviors

Although statistics on this subject are difficult to calculate, it is estimated that 25% of the adults in the U.S. with an eating disorder are men (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope & Kessler, 2007). The number of males diagnosed with eating disorders is increasing at an alarming rate. While women are overrepresented in most eating disorders, men suffer from binge eating disorder at a rate almost equal to that of women.

Like their female counterparts, males are also utilizing extreme measures to change the shape and size of their bodies. From taking weight-gain supplements and steroids to having plastic surgery, men are putting themselves at risk. When it comes to plastic surgery, the procedure men undergo most often is liposuction. In fact, while men represent only 9% of the total cosmetic surgery population, they make up 12% of those who receive liposuction (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2005).



Males at Risk

As is the case with females, males at the most risk for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders are those who are overweight and those who diet. However, there are other factors that may place males at an increased risk for poor body image:

- Participation in a sport that has strict weight requirements (runners, jockeys, wrestlers, bodybuilders, etc.)
- Residing in the gay community (Feldman & Meyer, 2007).
- Employment in a career that has physical restrictions (entertainers, models, actors, etc.)
- Teasing from family members, peers, and intimate partners

- Being overweight or obese as young children
- Exposure to media focused on the male bodybuilder ideal



Improving Male Body Image

Males, much like females, should focus on the positive aspects of their bodies and strive to accept and celebrate their true shape and size. Males specifically should:

- **Redefine masculinity.** Do not rely on society's definition of how a man "should" look. Focus on what you accomplish as a man, not how you look.
- **Pay attention to internal messages** about their bodies. Watch inner "talk," and replace negative comments and thoughts with more positive ones.
- **Critically evaluate** media images (from magazines, television, movies, etc.) that focus on the "bodybuilder" physique.
- **Accept individual DNA.** Not everybody can be muscular and lean. Consider the many determinants of body size and shape: family history, race/ethnicity, culture, etc. Be realistic about developing a healthy body, and don't forget about the influence of genetics.
- **Participate in sports that do not regulate size and weight.** It is important to remain active for health reasons, but some activities may be detrimental if they focus on size and weight. Take part in activities that people of all sizes can participate in (football, basketball, baseball, golf, bowling, etc.).

Resources

"Males with Eating Disorders," Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders (ANRED): <http://www.anred.com/males.html>

"Eating Disorders," MedlinePlus:
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/eatingdisorders.html>

National Eating Disorders Association (EDAP)
home page: <http://www.edap.org>

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