

Uncomfortable in Their Own Skin: Body image for girls and boys

Not only do Indiana's high school students have higher rates of being overweight and obese than their peers nationally, they also are more likely to describe themselves as overweight even when their body mass index (BMI) is within a healthy range. It is not abnormal for adolescents to find something they don't like about their bodies,² but some of their more serious body-image concerns may lead to unhealthy thoughts and behaviors.

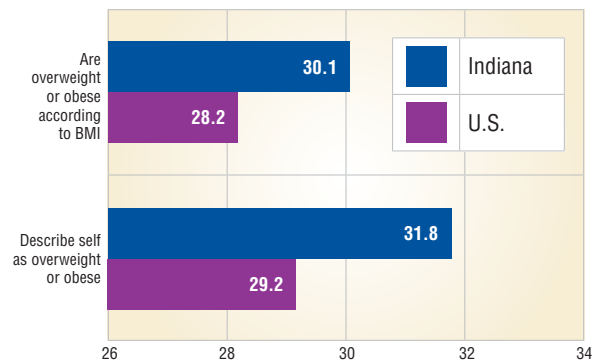
Having a negative body image puts adolescents at increased risk for disordered eating, depressed mood, low self-esteem, decreased overall well-being, and body dysmorphic disorder (see box on p2).² Even more concerning are the harmful effects of some of the actions that both males and females take to overcome their body dissatisfaction. Indiana's teens are less likely than their national peers to eat healthy and exercise, but more likely to engage in risky behaviors to keep from gaining weight.

Attempting to change body size or shape too drastically, too quickly, or too early in a child's development may prove harmful. For example, taking pills or supplements, not eating, purging, and over-exercising can lead to serious health issues and, in severe cases, even death.

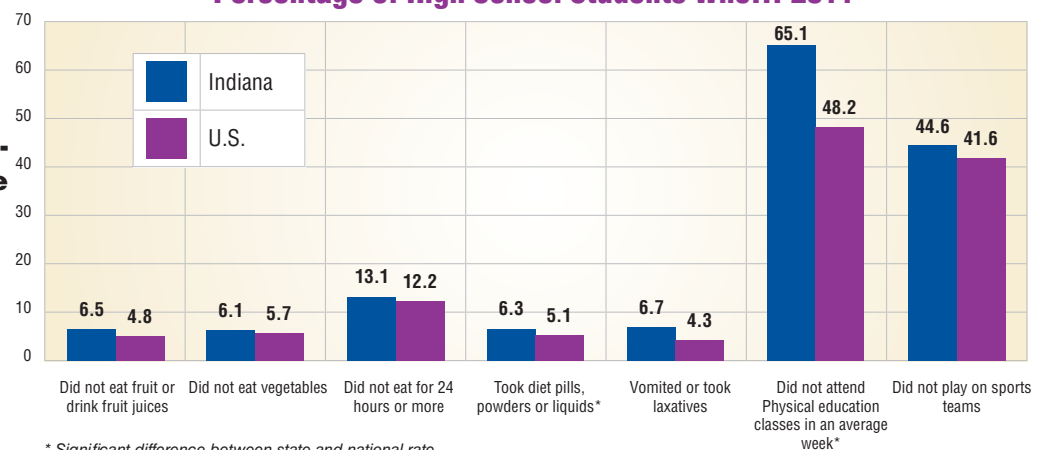
In Indiana nearly one in fifteen high school students has used diet pills or powders or have vomited or taken laxatives in order to lose weight, and more than one in eight has stopped eating for 24 hours or more in the last year in order to lose weight.¹



Percentage of High School Students Who... 2011



Percentage of High School Students Who... 2011



Girls vs. Boys

While girls show higher levels of body dissatisfaction overall, body-image concerns are an issue for boys as well. Because risk factors and subsequent behaviors often are different for boys than for girls, it is important to look at gender differences in body dissatisfaction.⁴

Boys develop body dissatisfaction earlier than girls, and their body image often improves during their teen years. Late maturing boys, who are farther away from the body ideals than their peers, are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction. Boys are divided between those who desire to lose weight and those who wish to gain weight and musculature. For boys, pressure to gain muscle is a greater predictor of body dissatisfaction and weight-changing behaviors than the pressure to lose weight.⁷ In fact, boys with the highest levels of body dissatisfaction have identical weight to those who showed greatest satisfaction.⁴

Girls are likely to develop body-image concerns as they enter adolescence. Research has shown that girls' self-esteem declines rapidly starting at age 12 and doesn't improve until 20.⁵ Even at age 10, four out of five girls are afraid of being fat.⁶ While male and female high school students have similar rates of obesity according to their body mass index, females are significantly more likely to describe themselves as overweight and to develop eating disorders and unhealthy dieting habits.¹

What Influences Body Image?

Multiple factors influence adolescents' ideals about physical appearance, including social norms, media images, and messages from parents and peers.³ Youth who have experienced abuse or prejudice are at a higher risk of developing negative body image,⁸ as are youth who have low-quality relationships with parents and peers.⁹

Exposure to images of idealized bodies also affects body dissatisfaction.³ Youth who frequently think about wanting more defined muscles and those who are making a lot of effort to look like same-gender figures in the media are three times more likely than their peers to use products to build muscle or improve appearance.³ The degree to which media images impact ideals depends both on the extremity of the images seen and the amount of pre-existing low body satisfaction. The impact of viewing media is greater when images are more extreme and pre-existing body satisfaction is low.⁹

For boys, research has shown that viewing images of attractive, muscular men decreases body satisfaction.¹⁰ Similarly research about girls has shown that exposure to images portraying the thin-ideal woman result in increased in body dissatisfaction.¹¹ While toys for young girls have

Percentage of Indiana High School Students By Gender Who... 2011	Male	Female
Are overweight or obese according to their BMI	30.3	30.0
Describe themselves as overweight or obese	26.6	37.3
Did not eat for 24 hours or more in order to lose weight	9.3	17.0
Took diet pills or powders in order to lose weight	5.3	7.4
Vomited or took laxatives in order to lose weight	5.3	8.1

long been recognized as conforming to the thin ideal, toys for boys have only started increasing in muscularity over the last thirty years. Today most boy toys exceed the muscularity of even the largest body builders.¹²

Direct messages from parents and peers also influence body image. Research has shown that negative comments from family and friends about anyone's body may decrease body satisfaction.⁸ Messages from parents and peers tend to be different for boys and girls. Boys receive messages regarding increasing muscles and those messages decrease over time. Girls, on the other hand, receive messages regarding weight loss and those messages increase over time. However, for both boys and girls, messages from parents and close same-sex friends are likely to result in attempts to change physical size and shape.³

Participating in certain athletic activities also increases risk for teen body-image concerns and negative behaviors. For example, activities that require a weight restriction such as gymnastics, track, swimming, wrestling or rowing place teens at a higher risk for developing eating disorders, and muscle-heavy sports such as weight lifting, football or basketball place teens at a higher risk for excessive muscle-enhancing behaviors.¹³

“Western culture currently endorses an ultra-thin figure for women and a lean, muscular one for men.”

– Katherine Presnell, PhD.³

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is the clinical designation for individuals with extraordinary levels of body dissatisfaction.

People with BDD think about their real or perceived body flaws for hours each day and cannot control their negative thoughts.

They also commonly suffer from anxiety disorders such as obsessive compulsive disorder or social anxiety disorder, as well as depression and eating disorders.

Other Related Behaviors

Negative body image is associated with a variety of additional risk factors for adolescents. For example, teenagers often start smoking cigarettes in order to avoid weight gain [32], and

individuals with decreased body satisfaction are more likely to report drug [33] and alcohol use than their peers. [34] Body dissatisfaction also is associated with an increased likelihood of being bullied, as well as depression and suicidal thoughts. [34]

Muscle-enhancing Behaviors

Regular physical activity and exercise are healthy for children of all ages. However, over-exercising or taking supplements in order to gain muscle can be dangerous. About a third of youth report trying to increase their muscle size or tone¹³, and boys are more likely to do so than girls. Striving for extreme levels of muscularity and leanness can cause youth to make risky decisions such as athletic training despite injury, using steroids, or engaging in unhealthy eating or dieting.

Teens who participate in sports teams, those who have a high body mass index, and boys are at increased risk for using unhealthy muscle-enhancing behavior.¹³ Boys are most likely to have low body image just before adolescence and their body satisfaction tends to increase as they get older. Trying to build muscle before they hit puberty may cause young boys to put too much strain on their muscles, tendons and areas of cartilage that haven't yet turned to bone.¹⁵ Muscle-building exercises will make younger boys leaner and stronger, but not bigger or more obviously muscular.¹⁶

The American Academy of Pediatrics warns against the use of dietary supplements and anabolic steroids, especially for those under age 18. However, it may be difficult to identify someone who participates in unhealthy muscle-building activities because they usually appear to be in good health. Overall 34.7% of youth use protein powders or shakes, and 5.9% report steroid use in order to build muscle.¹³

Steroids

Anabolic steroids are synthetically produced forms of the hormone testosterone. They often are illegally used to enhance strength, size or aggressiveness.¹⁸ Anabolic steroids have been shown to have negative long-term effects such as infertility, depression, paranoia, impaired judgment, and even some fatalities.²²



Supplements

Dietary supplements are intended to add to the nutrients already found in foods, but often are used to replace rather than complement meals.¹⁷ Most nutritional supplements, including amino acids, creatine, and protein powder, have not been scientifically proven to increase muscle gain and often show varying results.¹⁸

- Amino acids are intended to stimulate protein creation and reduce muscle breakdown. However, studies have shown that the use of amino acid supplements do no better for the building of muscle than strength training and a healthy diet.¹⁹
- Creatine is naturally absorbed into the body by eating foods such as fish and meats. However, in high doses creatine may harm kidney, liver or heart function.²⁰
- Most teens get the recommended daily allowance of protein through food alone, and drinking too many high-protein shakes can lead to protein toxicity and can cause calcium loss, dehydration and kidney problems.²¹

Dieting Behaviors

Having a healthy diet is important for all youth. However, many teenagers engage in dieting behaviors that decrease health, such as chronic dieting (more than 10 diets in a year), fad dieting, fasting and skipping meals. No matter their body weight, teenagers who are dissatisfied with their bodies are more likely to engage in unhealthy weight control practices than those who are not. One study showed that youth with body image distortion (overestimation of weight status) are 4.3 times more likely to engage in extreme weight loss behavior.²³

Risks of this type of dieting include nutritional deficiencies, particularly in iron and calcium, as well as fatigue, irritability and distraction. Furthermore, because these diets often are short-lived and unsuccessful, they exacerbate negative self-esteem and body image for the dieters.²³

Eating Disorders:

Extreme dieting behaviors also include eating disorders, serious emotional and physical illnesses that can have life-threatening consequences.²⁷ The median age of onset for eating disorders is 12 years²⁴, and disordered eating is more common among girls than boys. However, males with eating disorders are less likely to seek professional help than females.²⁵

Someone with an eating disorder may eat, diet or exercise excessively, may severely restrict food or calorie intake, or may vomit after meals. Though they often are underweight, individuals with eating disorders have an intense fear of becoming fat.²⁶ The following are the most common types of eating disorders:

- **Anorexia Nervosa** is the eating disorder that is most likely to cause death²⁷ because it is characterized by self-starvation, excessive weight loss, and a preoccupation with weight control. People with anorexia nervosa usually see themselves as overweight even when they are underweight.²⁷
- **Bulimia Nervosa** involves eating unusually large amounts of food then participating in purging behaviors such as self-induced vomiting or taking laxatives to prevent weight gain.³⁰ People with bulimia nervosa are usually at a healthy or normal weight, or slightly overweight, and want desperately to lose weight.²⁷
- **Binge-eating Disorder** is when a person loses control over his or her eating, but does not follow it with purging or fasting. People who binge-eat are usually overweight or obese and experience guilt, shame and distress about their binge-eating.²⁷

What to Do

If you suspect a youth may be dealing with body image concerns, below are suggestions about how to approach the subject and encourage healthy behaviors.

Listen

Incorporate questions about body image into your daily routine; ask youth about their own body image concerns, as well as what struggles their friends are having. Be aware of their eating habits and ask about their thoughts and feelings about food. As you listen, avoid placing shame, blame or guilt regarding their actions or attitudes.³⁵

Be Aware of What You Say

The messages you send about your body and the comments you make about others impact youth. Constant dieting and comments such as “you’ll get fat if you eat that” send a strong message. Never emphasize body size or shape as an indication of worth or identity. Provide youth with information about body image, healthy weight and shape, and media influences, and let youth know that you like and respect them no matter what they weigh.

Encourage Healthy Behaviors

If a youth is concerned about his or her body shape or size, do not reinforce their desire to be thin or muscular. Instead, help the youth to establish a sense of control through knowledge of healthy behaviors that include appropriate exercise and balanced eating.

Encourage youth to explore different types of physical activities.³⁶ Utilizing heavy weights or over-exercising may cause harm to young muscles. However, fun and varied activities that involve running, jumping and climbing can help youth build muscle and reduce body weight.

Encourage healthy and balanced eating. For example, if a youth is talking about a particular diet, provide nutritionally sound information about healthy diets and dangers related to fad diets.

Help Youth Be Aware of Messaging

Teach young people to be critical of the media and advertising, including why advertisers might want people to be unhappy with the way they look. Talk with youth about the ways in which cultural attitudes regarding ideal body shape are influenced by the media and provide them with alternative ways of thinking about beauty, strength and attractiveness.²

Discourage Bullying

Teach youth strategies to deal with put-downs or negative comments about their size or shape. Remind youth that being the target of bullying is not their fault and encourage them to share concerns with an adult. Confront individuals who try to “toughen up” young men by verbally attacking their masculinity or who devalue women who do not fit the thin ideal.

Signs of Body Dissatisfaction

Many of the signs and symptoms of body dissatisfaction, such as weighing oneself or spending a lot of time looking in a mirror, are not inherently dangerous.

However, when done excessively or compulsively, these behaviors may indicate a teen’s propensity to undertake additional, more risky behaviors. Other signs of body dissatisfaction or its related risky behaviors include:

- Continually worrying about or using negative terms to describe how they look
- Avoiding social situations
- Feeling as though they have to change their appearance before they can have fun
- Constantly exercising or continuing to exercise despite an injury
- Constant or extreme dieting
- Extreme thinness or fear of gaining weight
- Unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy weight
- Chronically inflamed and sore throat
- Acid reflux disorder and other gastrointestinal problems
- Extreme periods of binge-eating
- Eating only low-fat or fat-free foods
- Using pills or supplements to control appetite or weight
- Desperately wanting to look like a model, celebrity or superhero

Resources

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) provides free resources for parents, educators and coaches on eating disorders. These “toolkits” include information on signs, symptoms, treatment options and common myths about the disorders.

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/toolkits>

- NEDA provides a toll-free, confidential Helpline, Monday-Thursday from 9:00 am - 9:00 pm and Friday from 9:00 am - 5:00 pm (EST): 1-800-931-2237
- NEDA provides a free online screening and referral tool to gauge risk of an eating disorder. <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/online-eating-disorder-screening>

Advocates for Youth provides a lesson plan on body image and media influence that is free of charge. <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/for-professionals/lesson-plans-professionals/197?task=view>

Child Trends provides a guide for out-of-school time programs about diet, exercise and body image for youth. <http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=assessing-diet-exercise-body-image-and-weight-of-adolescents-a-guide-for-out-of-school-time-program-practitioners>

Purdue University Extension provides lesson plans about healthy body image for high school and middle school students. Lesson plans include four activities with facilitator notes, discussion outlines and handouts, as well as a companion piece on healthy exercises for every body type. <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/CFS/CFS-737-W.pdf>

TeachBodyImage is a portal for Teachers and Parents that provides free lessons on topics from self-esteem and body image, to media literacy and healthy eating. The portal also provides information on why teaching body image is important for children in grades K-3, 4-6 and 7-8. <http://www.teachbodyimage.com/>

Dove's Self Esteem Project has resources for building the self-esteem of young girls. The project has articles for parents, as well as activity and workshop guides. <http://www.dove.us/Our-Mission/Girls-Self-Esteem/Get-Involved/default.aspx>

The Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) is the most widely used standardized self-report measure of symptoms and concerns characteristic of eating disorders. EAT-26 is free and can be used in nonclinical and clinical settings in order to determine if a person should be referred to a specialist. The test is not designed to diagnose an eating disorder or take the place of a professional diagnosis. <http://www.eat-26.com/>

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Sources



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