

Women and eating issues

Understanding food and body image

July 2009

This infosheet examines the struggles, pressures and conflicts many women and girls experience with food and body image.

Being concerned about their physical appearance is commonly assumed to be a 'natural' part of being female and most women in western societies have dieted at some stage of their lives. However, a small number (one to two per cent) of women become obsessed with food, developing eating patterns that seriously affect their health. The medical profession describes these conditions as eating disorders.

If you are concerned that someone you know may be affected by an eating disorder or have high levels of anxiety about how they look or what they eat, the following information can help clarify what an eating disorder is and where you can get help.

Eating extremes

Women are more likely than men to develop an eating disorder, typically in adolescence when girls develop 'curves' and are likely to be more insecure and self-conscious about their bodies.

The Australian Longitudinal Study of Women's Health found that 72% of the young women surveyed aged between 18 to 22 years wanted to weigh less and only

25% of those in the healthy weight range were happy with their current weight. The study also revealed that nearly 48% of the young women had dieted to lose weight in the previous year. The 2005 National Health Survey reported 9% of females aged 18 to 24 years were classified as underweight.

A 2006 survey of young people by Mission Australia found that body image is a significant concern for close to 30% of young Australians, both males and females.

A prolonged or severe eating disorder may be life-threatening. Some of the more recognised extreme eating disorders are:

- **Anorexia nervosa** – an intense fear of gaining weight, a distorted body image, and the maintenance of a dangerously low body weight.
- **Bulimia nervosa** – recurrent episodes of binge eating followed by purging (vomiting and using laxatives and/or diuretics, or self-starvation) as well as strong feelings of guilt and body dissatisfaction.
- **Anorexia athletica** – exhibits the same relationship to food and body image as in anorexia and bulimia nervosa but also includes excessive exercise and is prevalent in athletes, particularly runners and gymnasts where physical appearance is a focus.
- **Compulsive overeating or binge eating disorder** – similar to bulimia nervosa with frequent episodes of excessive eating but without purging behaviours. It is often accompanied by a sense of loss of control and, in many cases, unhealthy weight gain.

Women's Infolink

Women's Infolink provides an information and referral service about health, safety, financial security and equity issues for Queensland women. It offers information about Office for Women programs, seminars, events, fact sheets and publications.

Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm

Women's Infolink 1800 177 577
www.women.qld.gov.au

Telephone Translator Service 13 14 50
TTY (07) 3877 8226

Infosheet series

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Many more women develop what researchers call **disordered eating** in response to feelings of dissatisfaction and depression about their bodies. Research in the last few decades has consistently shown that most women in western societies want to be thinner.

What are the causes of disordered eating?

Social influences and stresses help us to understand why so many women and girls have an unhealthy relationship with food and body image. Advertising and the mass media use images of young, thin and often prepubescent female bodies. Popular media is also saturated with confusing, and sometimes misleading, information and advice on fitness, health, fashion and dieting, reinforcing a standard of beauty and thinness which is unrealistic and unachievable for the average woman.

Some women's self-esteem is attached to their success in achieving a 'thin ideal'. Young women are especially susceptible to this message. The 'thin ideal' illusion is increasingly removed from the physical reality of most women's bodies. Failure to achieve this 'thin ideal' is almost inevitable and women may experience depression and take punishing and drastic steps to match the ideal.

Previous trauma may reduce a woman's sense of personal control, leading her to feel that the only real control she has is over her body. Experiences of violence or abuse, especially sexual abuse, can have a lasting effect on a woman's feelings for, and respect of, her body. Studies in Australia, Great Britain and the United States have found that women who have experienced sexual abuse are more likely to develop eating disorders. Fear of violence can also restrict a woman's activities and freedom of movement.

Obesity has also gained increased media attention in recent years, but it is important that this does not lead to people with bigger bodies than the slender 'ideal' being stigmatised as unattractive, unhealthy or slovenly. Western culture perpetuates many negative stereotypes about 'fatness', which can lead to an unhealthy relationship with food and poor body image if a woman views herself as 'fat'.

Many women blame themselves if dieting has not been successful. Research shows that the body compensates for low calorie dieting by slowing down the metabolic rate, thus using less energy, and storing more fat. Obesity and compulsive overeating can also result from prolonged periods of unsuccessful dieting and bouts of starvation.

Achieving a healthy body is dependent on a balanced approach to physical, social and emotional well-being.

Healthy body image: ideas for change!

We all have the power to challenge social and cultural messages that make women feel less positive about themselves. For example, you could:

- recognise and challenge advertising that reinforces the 'thin ideal'
- monitor your own reactions to (other) women – do you respond to what they look like or what they do and say?
- be creative – support new images and new role models that enable women to feel good about themselves
- be active – participation in physical activity increases women's feeling that their bodies are capable and competent
- be respectful and inclusive and help create a culture of valuing the individuality of all women and girls
- learn about a healthy lifestyle based on wholesome food and regular exercise.

Disclaimer

The information contained in this infosheet is correct at the time of publishing. The information is not intended to constitute advice, nor does it propose or discuss government policy directions.

Contacts

Women's Infolink

For referral to a service nearest to you.
1800 177 577

Office for Women 'Find a Service'

Online service locator of more than 2000 government and community services for women.
www.women.qld.gov.au/findaservice

Isis - The Eating Issues Centre

(07) 3844 6055
www.isis.org.au

Eating Disorders Association

(07) 3394 3661
www.eda.org.au

Eating Disorder Outreach Service

(07) 3114 0809

Mental Health Association of Queensland

1300 729 686
(07) 3271 5544
www.mentalhealth.org.au

Women's Health

Brisbane metropolitan (07) 3839 9988
Outside Brisbane metropolitan 1800 017 676
www.womhealth.org.au

The Butterfly Foundation

(02) 9412 4499
www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au

1800 numbers are free unless from a mobile phone. 13 and 1300 numbers are at local call cost unless from a mobile phone.