

# Body image - men

Your body image is what you think you look like. This may have little to do with your actual appearance. Around one in four Australian men in the healthy weight range believe themselves to be fat, while 17 per cent of men are on a weight loss diet at any given time. Men also worry about being muscular. A desire to fit the media portrayed ideal masculine image of lean muscularity means that over-exercising and the use of dangerous and illegal drugs (like steroids) are on the rise.

It's estimated that about 45 per cent of Western men are unhappy with their bodies to some degree, compared with only 15 per cent some 25 years ago. Research suggests that models, dancers, athletes and men who consider themselves to be homosexual may be particularly vulnerable to poor body image or feeling insecure about their bodies. This is because they are more likely to be in situations where they may be judged (or believe they will be judged) according to their appearance.

## Body image and self-destructive behaviours

A negative body image encourages a range of self-destructive behaviours, including:

- **Fad dieting** – around 17 per cent of men are dieting at any given time. Those diets are not always nutritionally sound.
- **Eating disorders** – around one in four people with anorexia nervosa is now male.
- **Exercise dependence** – around 20 per cent of regular exercisers (approximately five per cent of the population) are addicted to exercise, either psychologically or physically.
- **Steroid abuse** – around three per cent of Australian teenage boys use muscle-enhancing drugs (like steroids).

## Causes of negative body image

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

- teasing in childhood and adolescence (being called too thin, too weak or too fat)
- peer pressure among teenage boys to be physically 'tough' and 'strong'
- a cultural tendency to judge people on their appearance
- the emphasis on male sports players as role models for boys
- advertising campaigns and media coverage featuring idealised male images
- promotion by society of the 'ideal' man as always being strong, lean and muscular
- well-meaning public health campaigns that urge people to lose weight.

## Body image problems in Australian men

Most experts believe the real figures on eating and exercise disorders among Australian men could be much higher. Men are less likely to seek medical help than women for any type of illness. Since worrying about weight, eating behaviours and body shape has sometimes been seen as a 'female' problem, men may be less likely to ask for help.

## **Improving body image**

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

- Reflect on your experiences and try to identify the influences on your body image from childhood.
- Try weighing or 'body-checking' (pinching, measuring, mirror-checking) yourself less often. Focus on health and vitality, not weight, size and shape.
- Make a pact with yourself to treat your body with respect, which includes eating well and not embarking on punishing exercise routines, or taking drugs.
- Try to shift to a healthier focus of how your body functions and consider all it helps you do in life, rather than just focusing on how it looks.
- Get informed by reading up on body image issues.
- Develop reasons for exercising (such as stress release, vitality or improved concentration), rather than concentrating only on changing your body shape.

## **Finally,**

- Body image is the way you perceive, think and feel about your body.
- Poor body image is a male problem too, with around half of all men feeling unhappy with their body shape or size.
- Figures on male anorexia, bulimia and exercise dependence could be much higher than quoted, since men are traditionally reluctant to seek medical help.

[www.lrhartley.com/selfesteem](http://www.lrhartley.com/selfesteem)