



"Massive Minds, Huge Hearts, Guided by God"

Young People – Body Image and Food

The teenage years are a time when young people are developing eating and lifestyle patterns for the future. Parents play a key role in helping them develop healthy habits and routines.

Body image is strongly linked with eating habits and lifestyle. It is important for both boys and girls to develop a positive body image because feeling good about your body provides a strong foundation for good self-esteem and healthy development.

Being a teenager can change everything

As children move into the pre-teen and teenage years they go through many physical, emotional and social changes. Their brain and body go through many developmental changes. They are working out their own unique identity and what is important to them, forming peer groups and moving towards independence. These changes can affect how they feel about themselves and how they look, how they view food and what they eat.

Body image

Body image develops over time and is influenced by many things, including family attitudes, peer groups, advertising, media, and social norms and expectations. Body image isn't about how your body looks - it is about how you see yourself, how you feel about the way you look, and how you think others see you.

Studies show that body image worries start early. Pre-schoolers understand that society judges people by their looks. Even young children can feel unhappy about their bodies and this can affect their relationship with food. Body image becomes even more important in the teen years and is a strong factor in young people's self-esteem.

In the past it was mostly girls who were unhappy with their bodies. Studies now show the rate of body dissatisfaction in boys is fast approaching that of girls. The biggest worry for boys is being lean, fit and muscular in an effort to be a 'real' man. That is, fit a masculine stereotype.

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Poor body image can put both boys and girls at risk for harmful weight management strategies, eating disorders and mental health problems.
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The influence of media

Media has more influence on young people's body image and food choices than ever before due to the extensive reach of digital media and advertising. There is a big focus on looks being more important than anything else about you. The strong message is 'You are what you look like'.

- Images of 'perfect bodies' can create pressure for young people going through the turmoil of puberty. This is often a time when they feel self-conscious and insecure about themselves. In an effort to live up to media images girls can put their health at risk by extreme dieting and exercise. Boys may over-exercise or use risky body-enhancing substances to 'bulk up'. That is, build muscle.
- Social media has many benefits for young people, including helping them create their identity, express themselves and communicate with peers and others. Many social media sites now use photos more than text for communicating. For example, Snapchat and Instagram. There is a lot of pressure to look good, and to 'be cool' and popular.
- For young people who are not confident or don't feel popular with their peers, this can cause problems. Teenage girls in particular can feel inadequate and develop body image problems when they spend a lot of time comparing themselves to the images of friends and peers on social media.
- Celebrity culture has become a modern-day phenomenon. Children and young people can be impressed by the glamorous looks and lifestyles of their favourite musicians and actors. Studies show that food and drink choices of children and teens are influenced by celebrity-endorsed products, most of which are unhealthy and linked with obesity and childhood diabetes.

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Both boys and girls can be influenced by the false expectations created by media images, advertising and celebrity culture.

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What is healthy eating for a teenager?

Teenagers have a healthy attitude toward food and eating if most of the time they eat when hungry, stop when full, and don't feel guilty about eating.

Skipping meals, restricting intake and overeating are only problematic if your teen does these things often or if they become a pattern. It is usual for teens to:

- eat different amounts on different days, to eat more of the foods they like and less of what they don't like, and to either overeat or limit food intake at times
- eat more when having a 'growth spurt' and then cut back or return to their usual way of eating when things settle down again
- try new ways of eating, such as becoming vegetarian. When experimenting with different ways of eating, it is important your teen learns how to create a balanced diet with all the nutrients they need for this critical time of growth and development. A dietitian can help with designing a balanced diet.

What about dieting?

Dieting is so common it can be seen as a normal part of eating. However, dieting should be discouraged because it is rarely successful and usually leads to weight gain in the longer term.

- For most young people, dieting doesn't last long and they soon return to their usual way of eating. If their usual eating and activity habits are not healthy, they may be at risk of becoming overweight or

obese. They can also end up establishing a cycle of 'yo-yo dieting' and never learn to develop a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

- Dieting can be dangerous for some teens who feel unhappy about their body. It can lead to more serious eating problems and increase the risk of developing an eating disorder.

If there is a weight concern, help your teen feel loved and good about themselves while making small healthy changes to eating and exercise for the long term. Talk with your doctor or dietitian for ideas.

What parents can do

There are many ways parents can support young people to develop a healthy relationship with food and a positive body image. The most important thing is to be a good role model. Be happy with your body, avoid diets and don't make negative comments about your own or others' weight or looks. Young people are good at sensing a double standard.

Build a strong relationship with your teen

- Starting early, build a strong relationship with your teen which will make it easier to talk about sensitive things. Understand that boys might find it harder to talk about struggles with food and body image because it is often seen as a girls' issue. They also experience pressure to be tough and in control.
- Know what stresses your teen and help them find ways to reduce the impact.
- Listen to their opinions and try to accept they may have different views from yours. Don't get into power struggles - nobody wins. This includes avoiding battles around food.

Provide healthy food

- Instead of naming foods 'good' or 'bad' which reinforces diet thinking, use terms such as 'everyday foods' for things like fruit and vegetables that are healthy and nutritious, and 'sometimes food' for things like chips, biscuits, lollies or sugary drinks. Provide a range of healthy 'everyday foods' and let your teen decide what and how much of them to eat. Buy 'sometimes foods' for special occasions rather than keeping them in the house.
- Don't link food choices to feelings of guilt. When you eat 'sometimes' foods, be clear that you are choosing to do this and then return to your 'everyday' healthy food choices.

Create healthy eating habits in your family

- Build a positive attitude to food and healthy eating in your family. Encourage healthy eating as a normal and enjoyable part of life.

- Share meals together as often as you can. Turn TVs, phones and other screens off so you can focus on talking and connecting as a family.

Build positive body image and self-esteem

- Encourage your teen to view their body changes as a normal and positive part of growing up. Support them to accept their own unique shape and size and to resist the pressure to fit the 'thin stereotype', or the 'built' muscle-bound stereotype for boys.
- Help them see the tricks and tools that advertisers use to create unrealistic images. For example, digital airbrushing and photo editing. It can be fun to play 'Spot the Photoshop' and see who can find the most digital enhancements. In regard to social media, help them understand that most people put up images of an 'ideal self'. Many phones have built-in filters and special effects that can make even the worst selfie look good.
- Value things other than looks in your teen. Focus on what their body can do rather than what it looks like. Comment on their qualities and skills rather than their appearance. Let them know you love them just as they are and never tease them about their looks.
- When they use social media, encourage them to post constructive comments that support their friends for who they are, not what they look like.
- If your teen or one of their friends is being bullied, including about their appearance, make sure they know to discuss this with you or another trusted adult. You can help them work out what steps to take.

Encourage physical activity

- Physical activity contributes to good mental health, good self-esteem and a positive attitude towards the body. Encourage your teen to be involved in physical activity for fun as well as fitness. However, it is important to make sure they have a balanced approach to physical activity. There can be an increased risk of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders for people involved in competitive physical activity. For example, sports, fitness and dance.

Share the kitchen

- When young people leave home, many have limited cooking skills or experience of meal planning and wise food shopping. This can lead to eating fast foods which are often high in fat and sugar. Help teens become more responsible and skilled in the kitchen. Expect both sons and daughters to help cook meals. Suggest they plan, shop for and make a meal of their own choice for everyone, even if it's only one meal a week.

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Parents are still the most important influence in young people's lives. You have the power to help shape their values, attitudes and behaviour.

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When eating and body image become a problem

Signs to look out for

It can be hard to tell what is 'normal' eating when your teenager is making lots of changes and experimenting with different choices. When you know your teen well it is easier to notice changes in the way they eat. A problem can emerge if they develop a pattern of poor eating that continues for a long time, or has a negative effect on their life.

You might also notice the following changes:

Emotional and social

- not being as happy as usual
- not wanting to mix with friends or family
- being moody, less confident or unmotivated
- doing poorly at school
- sleeping a lot

Behaviour

- restricting the amount or types of food eaten
- being obsessed with counting calories
- making up rules about how to eat, such as eating food in a certain order, or no food after 6pm
- frequent dieting
- binge eating
- secrecy around eating, including eating in private or avoiding meals with others
- always weighing themselves or looking in the mirror
- comparing themselves to others or frequently asking if they look fat
- exercising to extreme, even if injured or sick. Boys in particular may become obsessed with body building, weight lifting or muscle toning and get anxious about missing workouts
- vomiting after meals or using laxatives a lot.

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If you are concerned, talk with your teen about what's going on in their life as soon as you can. Help them deal with the feelings behind the eating pattern. Talk to your doctor or a counsellor if you need support.

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Eating disorders

Eating disorders can develop when people are intensely worried about losing control of their eating and becoming overweight. They can develop distorted thinking and feelings about food and their body, resulting in unhealthy eating and often extreme exercise habits. Eating disorders can happen in people of any age but studies show young people are more at risk. Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that can involve other conditions such as anxiety disorders or harmful substance use.

Eating disorders include:

- Anorexia Nervosa - when the young person restricts food intake to the point of becoming dangerously thin. They may restrict certain food groups, become obsessed with counting calories or have rigid thinking and rules around food. They often see themselves as overweight despite being very underweight. They can develop serious health problems and may end up in hospital.
- Bulimia Nervosa - when the young person eats very large amounts of food in a short space of time and then makes themselves vomit, takes laxatives or does excessive exercise to avoid weight gain. Their weight can be in the normal range, making it harder to notice they may have an eating disorder.
- Binge Eating Disorder (BED) - when the young person's eating becomes out of control at times. They eat very large amounts in a short period but don't vomit, purge or exercise to 'work it off'. BED can lead to health problems such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.
- Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorders (OSFED) - the young person has disturbed eating, an intense fear of gaining weight as well as body image problems.
- Although the symptoms don't fit specifically into one of the other eating disorder categories, OSFED is just as serious. It is the most common disorder diagnosed for adults and young people, both male and female.

Eating disorders can have serious physical, emotional and social impacts on your teen, your family and friends. People can recover from eating disorders but it may take a long time. It is best to not ignore the signs.

Getting help

If you are concerned about your child, get help early to prevent major health problems. Your doctor is a good place to start. If your child is diagnosed with an eating disorder they often need a team of health professionals to help them deal with the emotional, thinking and eating aspects of the disorder. This may include dietitians, family therapists, social workers, psychologists or psychiatrists. It is important to seek support for yourself and other family members as well.

You can get further advice and support from:

- School
- School Nurse
- Doctor
- <https://parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk/article/helping-your-child-develop-a-positive-body-image>
- <https://www.nsfh.nhs.uk/parent-workshops#eating%20difficulties>