



MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE: A FACT SHEET FOR PARENTS

How can the media have an impact on a teenager's body image?

- Media play a large, and often negative, role in shaping young women's ideas about how they should look, including television and music (radio and recordings) videos and movies, computers, print media, and video games. Parents and others concerned about adolescents can help them deal with such influences in a healthy way.
- The physical images presented in media programming and advertising can be unhealthy and difficult, if not impossible, for most women to achieve. They frequently portray young women in a sexual manner. This can lead adolescents to think that their own bodies are not attractive or acceptable and that their value depends on how they look.
- Growing numbers of young women risk their health, and life, trying to imitate the body images presented by the media. The wrong media messages also can harm mental self-image and self-esteem.
- The media generally show underweight women as the ideal body type. The average model today is 25% thinner than the national average weight and actually only represents 5% of females in the country.
- Almost 54% of American young girls and women aged 12–23 years are unhappy with their bodies.
- One third of high-school students think they are overweight even when they are not. Five to ten million women and girls have eating disorders that harm their health, including anorexia nervosa (starving themselves) and bulimia nervosa (binge eating and purging) (see the "Weight Management" fact sheet).
- Some teens who think they are not pretty enough resort to cosmetic plastic surgery. In 2003, more than 223,000 cosmetic procedures were performed on patients 18 years of age or younger, and almost 39,000 of the procedures included nose reshaping, breast lifts, breast augmentation, liposuction, and tummy tucks. Sexualized female ideals have been linked to lower self-esteem, negative mood, and depressive symptoms among adolescent girls. They also tend to have unrealistic and negative expectations concerning sexuality.
- Feelings of self-consciousness and concerns about appearance can keep adolescent girls from participating in and enjoying physical activities.

What are warning signs of a teenager with an unhealthy body image?

- A teen who views herself only in terms of her physical looks may have an unhealthy or unrealistic self-image.
- The language teens use to describe themselves and their physical development and attractiveness may show that they have a negative view of their body image.
- Eating disorders and excessive dieting may be caused from unhealthy attempts to live up to inappropriate, underweight body images.
- Worries about sexual attractiveness, depression, and low self-esteem can be signs of an unhealthy body image.

What can parents do to improve their teenagers' body image?

- Adolescents should be encouraged to form realistic impressions of their bodies and to base self-esteem on a wide range of personal traits.
- Teens should become informed about healthy physical development and individual differences.
- Teens should be encouraged to eat a healthy diet and exercise to maintain good health.
- Teens should be encouraged to participate in positive family, peer, school, and community activities to enhance self-esteem based on their abilities and character rather than their appearance.

What can be done to decrease the influence of the media in presenting unrealistic models of how women should look?

- Make yourself aware of the media messages aimed at women and young people. Assess your own use of media and reactions to messages about attractiveness and self-worth.





- Use images on television and in other media sources as ways to open discussions with children and adolescents. Help them identify and critique media messages that are inaccurate and unhealthy. Encourage teens to use media resources that promote healthy development and behavior.
- Discourage use of negative terms that are body related, such as fat and ugly.
- Speak out against the negative and physically harmful ways the media portrays girls and women.

For More Information

We have provided information on the following organizations and web sites because they have information that may be of interest to our readers. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) does not necessarily endorse the views expressed or the facts presented by these organizations or on these web sites. Further, ACOG does not endorse any commercial products that may be advertised or available from these organizations or on these web sites.

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Telephone: (202) 638-5577 or (800) 673-8444

Web: www.acog.org

American Society of Plastic Surgeons

Telephone: (847) 228-9900

Web: www.plasticsurgery.org

Center for Media Literacy

Telephone: (310) 456-1225

Web: www.medialit.org

Girl Power!

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)

Telephone: (800) 729-6686

Web: www.girlpower.gov

Girls, Women + Media Project

Web: www.mediaandwomen.org/

Love Your Body Campaign

National Organization for Women (NOW) Foundation

Telephone: (202) 628-8NOW (8669)

Web: www.loveyourbody.nowfoundation.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

Telephone: (847) 831-3438

Web: www.anad.org

National Eating Disorders Association

Telephone: (206) 382-3587

Toll-free Information and Referral Helpline: (800) 931-2237

Web: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

The National Women's Health Information Center

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Office of Women's Health

Telephone: (800) 994-9662

Web: www.4woman.gov/bodyimage