

Feeling 'too fat' rather than being 'too fat' increases unhealthy eating habits among adolescents—even in boys

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Adolescence is a period of increased independence. Teens venture into the world with less parental supervision and make decisions for themselves. Adolescents become more responsible for food choices, especially when they are away from the home and out of the watchful eye of parents. Unfortunately, teens don't always make the healthiest choices. Adolescence is also a time when body image dissatisfaction heightens and eating disordered behaviors emerge. Both of these factors contribute to unhealthy food consumption patterns (skipping breakfast, low consumption of fruits and vegetables, and high consumption of sweets and sugar-sweetened beverages) and dieting behaviors that have become a major public health concern and are associated with both obesity and weight dissatisfaction.

Researchers in Sweden sought to examine how body perception and physical measurements relate to eating habits in boys and girls before and during adolescence. They examined 261 students (104 boys and 157 girls) between the ages of 7-17 who agreed to participate in a research study conducted in 2010. Participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their body perception ("do you think your body is too fat or too thin?") and eating habits (food consumption, meal choices, and dieting behavior). School nurses who were trained by the researchers took physical measurements of height, weight, and waist circumference.

Overall, the strongest risk factor for dieting behaviors in both girls and boys was perception of overweight, more so than actual physical measurements of weight. The researchers found, not surprisingly, that girls were more likely than boys to report feeling the need to lose weight. Concern for muscularity, a common manifestation of body image dissatisfaction for boys, was not assessed or mentioned in this study. Both boys and girls were equally likely to skip meals and, in both genders, skipping meals was associated with body dissatisfaction. It is possible that skipping meals represents a dieting behavior in which teens are attempting to lose weight by skipping meals. Both boys and girls who perceived themselves as overweight were more likely to report feeling the need to lose weight.

Eating habits were more strongly associated with body image than actual body weight. Girls who *felt* "too fat" and desired to be thinner skipped meals more often than girls who felt more satisfied with their bodies. Skipping meals was related to other unhealthy behaviors such as lower consumption of fruits and vegetables and higher consumption of sweets and sugary beverages. These behaviors are particularly important since eating behaviors that develop in adolescence tend to carry forward into adulthood. This research emphasizes the importance of weight neutral interventions to improve body image in adolescents (such as The Body Project) over weight-loss focused interventions (such as BMI report cards).

Reference:

Van Vilet J, Gustafsson PA, and Nelson N. (2016) Feeling 'too fat' rather than being 'too fat' increases unhealthy eating habits among adolescents—even in boys. *Food Nutrition Research*, 60:29530.