

Dieting: Information for parents, teachers and coaches

Messages suggesting that people need to physically change are everywhere—in magazines, on social media, on television, on posters and at the movies. They can also come from family members, peers, coaches, health care professionals, and even strangers. One of the strongest messages teens get is that they should be thin. Images and words send the message that being thin means being beautiful, happy and in control of our lives.

But in real life, people who are happy and successful come in all shapes and sizes.

Along with pressure to be thin, there are messages about how to lose weight. When we hear about “going on a diet”, we usually think about eating less or eating differently to try to lose weight.

Teens will often turn to dieting to try and change their bodies and feel better about themselves. Unfortunately, it usually doesn't work.

Did you know?

- About 1 in every 2 teenage girls and 1 in every 4 teenage boys have tried dieting to change the shape of their bodies.
- More than 1 in 3 girls who are at a healthy weight still try to diet.
- Dieting can lead to dangerous eating disorders.

Compared with teens who don't diet, teens who diet:

- are likely to weigh more by the time they are young adults,
- are more unhappy with their weight,
- tend to “feel fat” even if they are not,

- have lower self-esteem,
- feel less connected to their families and schools,
- feel less in control of their lives,
- are more likely to engage in unhealthy weight-loss behaviours such as using diet pills, laxatives or vomiting after meals,
- are more likely to have a parent who criticizes their weight, encourages them to diet or who is preoccupied with weight themselves.

Is dieting unhealthy?

Teens are still growing and need the right amount of nutrients to be healthy. Not eating foods from all food groups or eating too few calories can have serious negative effects on their health.

Teens who diet:

- Sometimes make **healthy choices** about nutrition, such as eating more fruit, vegetables and fibre, or cutting down on unhealthy snack foods.
- Sometimes make **unhealthy choices**, such skipping meals, eating too little or not eating enough variety of food.

However, they are often more concerned with how they look than their overall health. This can lead to unhealthy weight-loss goals.

If your teen wants be at a healthy weight, going on a diet is usually not a good solution because it may not work. Over time, children and youth may be more likely to gain weight if they try to diet.

Dieting can make teens feel:

- hungry and preoccupied with food (thinking about it all the time),
- distracted and tired,
- sad and unmotivated (don't feel like doing things),
- cold and dizzy,
- deprived of all the foods they enjoy.

In girls, dieting can lead to irregular or even absent periods.

Some forms of dieting can be dangerous to the health of children and youth because they involve skipping meals, using weight-loss pills, laxatives or vomiting after eating.

Isn't it normal for teens to worry about their weight?

While it is common for teens to feel self-conscious, always feeling bad about their bodies, worrying about weight or feeling guilty when they eat is not normal or healthy. This is called having a negative body image. Teens with a negative body image may also lack confidence in other areas of their lives.

If you are the parent of or know a teen who seems excessively worried about their weight, talk to them. It could be temporary and not lead to other problems, or you may be picking up on a more serious problem such as an eating disorder.

Dieting is not just a “female issue” and can affect males and gender variant youth.

What can I do?

- Talk to your teen about why they are dieting and how it is affecting their life.
- Acknowledge how they feel by letting them know you understand the pressures to be thin.
- Tell your teen that dieting doesn't work and may lead to overeating.
- Praise your teen for all their positive qualities—not just appearance.
- Enjoy all food groups every day. Following Canada's Food Guide can be helpful.
- Encourage your teen to be physically active every day. Choose activities that cover broad messages of health (not ones where the main goal is often to lose weight).

If you coach teens, be aware that your comments about weight are very powerful. Direct or indirect suggestions that weight loss would enhance performance can be very damaging to young athletes.

Is there anything else I can do?

Many teens who are preoccupied with their weight have a parent who is also preoccupied with weight. Consider your own eating and weight control behaviours. Does your attitude about food and your body tell your teen that it's normal to worry about weight?

Be a positive role model by eating healthy, balanced meals and snacks, and by being physically active. Show your teen that you accept your own body's shape and size as well as the shape and size of others.

Regular family meals are associated with many positive outcomes for teens, including reduced eating disorder behaviours.

When should I talk to a doctor?

If you have concerns, or notice your teen is dramatically changing their diet, talk to a doctor. Some of the warning signs are:

- dieting even if not overweight,
- physical changes, such as weakness, headaches or dizziness,
- eating in secret,
- passing up opportunities to participate in activities because of food or obsessive exercise,
- fear of food,
- vomiting after meals,
- using laxatives,
- loss of periods or irregular periods, or
- no weight gain from year to year.

Additional resources

- Canada Food Guide
(<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>)

- UnlockFood.ca (Dietitians of Canada)
(<https://www.unlockfood.ca/en/default.aspx>)
- The National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)
(<http://www.nedic.ca/>)

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- Adolescent Health Committee

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