

## Dieting: Information for teens

Messages suggesting that you need to change your physical appearance are everywhere—in magazines, on social media, on television, on posters and at the movies. They can also come from your family members, peers, coaches, health care professionals, and even strangers.

One of the strongest messages you may get is that you should be thin or have a lot of muscles and no body fat. Images and words send the message that being thin or having lots of muscles means you are more attractive, happy and in control of your life. But in real life, people who are happy and successful come in all shapes and sizes.

Along with pressure to have the “ideal” body, there are lots of messages about how to lose weight or change your shape. When we hear about “going on a diet”, we usually think about eating less or eating differently to try to lose weight.

### 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, friends, and school,

- 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.

## I hear a lot about how bad it is to be fat, so what's the problem with dieting?

Many teens turn to dieting to try and change their bodies and feel better about themselves. Unfortunately, it's not a healthy choice, usually doesn't work and can lead to weight-loss goals that are not healthy.

### Dieting can make you feel:

- hungry and preoccupied with food (thinking about it all the time),
- distracted and tired,
- sad and unmotivated,
- cold and dizzy,
- deprived of foods you enjoy.

For girls, dieting can lead to irregular or even absent periods. Males may develop symptoms of low testosterone.

Some kinds of dieting can be dangerous to your health, such as skipping meals, using weight-loss pills or laxatives, going on 'crash' diets, or vomiting after eating.

You are still growing and need the right amount of nutrients to be healthy. Eliminating entire food groups or taking in too few calories when your body is still developing can have serious negative effects on your health. **Everyone needs fats, carbohydrates and protein as part of their diet to be healthy.**

# Lots of teens talk about their weight. Isn't it normal to worry?

It's common for teens to feel self-conscious. But always feeling bad about your body, worrying about your weight or feeling guilty when you eat is not normal or healthy. This is sometimes called having a negative body image. Teens that have a negative body image often lack confidence in other areas of their lives as well.

Taking good care of your body by eating well and being physically active is a good way to feel better about yourself. It's important to be aware of the amount and quality of food you eat, but you shouldn't be obsessed with it.

## Here are some tips for healthy eating:

- Eat a wide variety of foods every day.
- Eat breakfast, lunch and supper every day.
- Eat when you are hungry and stop when you feel full.
- Enjoy all food groups every day. Following Canada's Food Guide can be helpful.
- Choose water instead of soft drinks, sports drinks, energy drinks, or juice.
- Choose foods that are high in fibre like bran, wheat and rye, including cereal or cereal bars.
- When you eat out, stop eating once you feel full. Remember that in most restaurants (especially fast food restaurants) portions are bigger than most people need in one sitting.
- Don't use food to make yourself feel better when you're bored, sad or upset.

## What else can I do?

Physical activity is an important part of staying healthy and feeling good about yourself. Spend time every day doing something active you enjoy, with people you enjoy. Exercise may have become unhealthy if it is linked to eating and changing your body, if you feel guilt when you can't exercise, or if you can't stop even when you are tired, injured, or sick.

If you think you worry too much about your weight or if your body image is interfering with your happiness, try to tell an adult you trust, like a parent, teacher, coach or doctor.

## Additional resources

- Canada's food guides (Health Canada)  
(<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>)
- When Eating and Weight are Concerns: A Glimpse at Eating Disorders (Dietitians of Canada)  
(<https://www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Adolescents-teenagers/When-Eating-and-Weight-are-Concerns--A-Glimpse-at-Eating-Disorders.aspx>)
- The National Eating Disorder Information Centre  
(<http://www.nedic.ca/>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Adolescent Health Committee

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