



Influence of Body Image Perception on Dietary Practice and Behaviour Among Adolescents

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Received: January 17, 2023

Published: February 03, 2023

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Abstract

An adolescent is any individual between 12 and 21 years of age [1]. Adolescence is a very crucial period characterized by quick physical growth and sexual maturity changing from childhood to adulthood [2]. It is a thrilling but challenging stage of human development [1]. Adolescence is largely the most dynamic and multiplex transitional period of life marked with physical, psychological and social developmental changes [3]. Changes that occur in adolescence are not independent of each other but are constantly interacting with one another [4]. Some physiological changes that can be noticed include, rapid physical growth coupled with maturation of basic sexual characteristics and development of secondary characteristics of sex [4]. The rapid growth and development seen during adolescence is a substitute of the gradual growth process seen in early childhood [1]. The rapid growth process in adolescence that replaces the otherwise gradual growth process usually leaves the adolescent fascinated, charmed or horrified [4]. Cognitive and emotional changes leave the adolescent feeling more independent and gravitating towards peer influence and acceptance more than family values which creates conflicts between parents and children [1]. All these changes makes body image perception a constantly ever-changing concept easily susceptible to more change as the adolescent interacts with the social environment [4].

Keywords: Body Image; Perception; Dietary Practice; Adolescents

Introduction

"Body" and "image" are conflicting words in that, "body" refers to the distinct and objective physical anatomy of an organism or being while "image" is the subjective mental perception or idea influenced by cultural and personal factors [4]. Body image is the representation of the body that is formed in the mind [5]. It is how a person perceives, thinks and feels about his or her body [6]. Body image is a reflection of one's physical and perceptual dimensions [4]. The representation of body image is dependent on biological and social factors like gender, race, age, cultural and socio-economic status [5]. Body image greatly influences a person's self-esteem and self-concept and other vital areas of human development like identity, sexuality and relationships throughout the life span [4]. Poor body image causes low self-esteem which subsequently leads to dissatisfaction in self [4]. Multiple adverse health behavior and conditions like poor nutritional status, unsafe weight control practices, depression and eating disorders have been linked with body

image dissatisfaction and distorted body image or perception [5]. Body image dissatisfaction refers to one being dissatisfied with his or her current body shape while distorted body image perception is having an unrealistic view of one's body [6]. Adolescents at this crucial stage in life are especially susceptible to unrealistic social and cultural ideas due to the rapid physical, mental and social changes associated with this stage [7]. Body image concerns increase with increase in age among adolescents [8].

Adolescents' idea of body image is particularly challenging in this period due to the many, quick and important changes that occur during this period [4].

The perception of an ideal body type for most adolescents is developed from peers, media, parents and other social factors [9]. Adolescents are often the targets of an appearance oriented society or culture which sees them as potential consumers [10]. Modern soci-

eties have put a high value on physical attractiveness which has led to the quest to find the ideal body [7]. The ideal body for adolescent girls is a slim or thin body as observed with female models due to the increase in obesity among adolescent girls while the ideal body for adolescent boys is a muscular body as with male models and actors which is a sharp contrast to the rapid gain in height seen in adolescent growth [4]. Most adolescents are concerned about their appearance in terms of body weight, shape and people's perception about their body [2]. [6] reports that females are more likely to be dissatisfied with their body image than males regardless their age. Adolescent girls are more conscious about their appearance and feel less attractive as compared to adolescent boys [3]. There is an increase of interest in appearance among adolescent boys with increase in media that accentuate appearance [2]. Body image plays a key role in shaping adolescents' dietary intake [7]. Body image dissatisfaction can lead to disagreeable dietary habits and improper weight loss practices [2].

Appropriate and adequate dietary intake helps develop good eating habits and provide nutrients needed for growth and development [11]. The many changes seen in adolescents have a direct impact on their nutrient needs and dietary intake [1]. Adolescents require higher dietary and nutritional intake hence have a higher risk of undernutrition due to the rapid growth in adolescence [12]. Most adolescents do not have good eating habits and do not reach their recommended dietary intake [3].

Many adolescents find themselves chasing an unachievable, almost imaginary body type that may lead to eating disorders due to several influences especially pressures in the society [7]. Body image perception is a proposed determinate of food choice [9]. The central diagnostic characteristic for all clinical eating disorder (anorexia, bulimia nervosa and bingeing) has been body image dissatisfaction [10]. Anorexia refers to extreme food restriction, a contrast to bulimia which is characterized by bingeing on food accompanied by compensatory purging through vomiting use of laxatives or obligatory unhealthy exercise while bingeing is binge eating with no purging [10].

Body image dissatisfaction leads to persistent dieting and in time complete eating disorder [8]. Some eating disorders found among adolescents that can be associated with body image perceptions include fasting, skipping of meals, unhealthy snacking and excessive consumption of fast foods [7]. Adolescents are more likely to be seen trying to lose weight with girls having higher prevalence of weight loss practices though male adolescents in Mauritius presented with more body image dissatisfaction than females [7]. Korean high school students reported trying undesirable weight control practices like fasting and the use of medicine [2]. Literature

supports that female adolescents with body image dissatisfaction are likely to go in for unhealthy weight control practices like fasting, self-induced vomiting, dieting, use of diet pills and laxatives [7]. Overweight female adolescents presented with higher body image dissatisfaction which suggested a hidden desire to be thin which justified the high want of almost all the girls in the overweight control group to lose weight [8]. The ideal of thinness is very popular among adolescents with many desiring to become thinner [7]. [8] reported that body image dissatisfaction is not only prevalent in overweight females but in all weight categories including underweight females with normal weight females being twice dissatisfied with their body image compared to overweight females. The desire to be thinner was not dependent on an accurate measure of body size but a perceived overweight [7].

According to [7], adolescents with body image dissatisfaction eat more processed for only which is a contrast to adolescents without body image dissatisfaction who eat several food groups. Dieting adolescents attested to eating fast foods [7]. There is no association between body image perception and fruit and vegetable intake thus body image perception did not result in healthy eating habits [9]. Adolescents with body image dissatisfaction ate less healthy foods [7].

Skipping of meals was observed as a behavior to control weight with a positive correlation between skipping of breakfast and overweight female adolescents [8]. Adolescents in all weight groups skip meals out of fear of becoming obese with increased prevalence among adolescents with body image dissatisfaction especially breakfast and dinner [7]. Skipping of meals, particularly breakfast can cause malnutrition which can in turn impair cognitive development and hence lead to poor academic performance [7]. Persistent dieting failure can have a psychological impact which be an added blow to the already depressed adolescent with body image dissatisfaction [8]. Persistent dieting and inadequate dietary intake will result in deficiency in some essential nutrients [8].

Conclusion

To conclude, adolescents' perception about their body image directly and indirectly affects their overall dietary practices which include what they eat, where they eat, how they eat and the time they eat. These in turn lead to the various eating disorders which in the long run put the adolescent at risk of malnutrition and other conditions thus there is the need for the provision of adequate nutrition information for the adolescent. This can be done by certified dietitians and nutritionist through the media, journals, during school gatherings and any other medium available for individuals in this stage of growth.

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