

## Teens and dieting

By Dr. Danielle Grenier



**Q:** My 13-year-old daughter is unhappy with her weight and has started to show an interest in dieting. Is this normal and should I be worried about her health?

**A:** Teenagers see them everywhere: media messages telling them how to change their physical appearances. They're in magazines, on the Internet, on television and at the movies. Most are ads designed to get teens to buy something, like clothes, makeup or a weight loss product.

One of the strongest messages teens get is that they need to be thin. Images and words in the media tell them that being thin means they are beautiful, happy and in control of their lives. But in real life, people who are happy and successful come in all shapes and sizes.

Along with the pressure to be thin, you hear about different ways 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 who go on a diet can make some good choices about nutrition (eating more fruit, vegetables and fibre, or cutting down on snack foods) or bad choices (skipping meals, eating too little or not eating enough variety of food).

Many teens turn to dieting to try to change their bodies and feel better about themselves. Unfortunately, it usually doesn't work. Dieting actually causes some people to gain weight.

Teens who diet are often more concerned with how they look than with their health. And this can lead to weight-loss goals that are not healthy.

If your teen wants to reach a healthy weight and stay there, going on a diet is not a good solution. It hardly ever works. Over time, children and youth may be more likely to gain weight if they try to diet. This is probably because going without

eating the foods they enjoy makes them feel deprived and sad, which then may lead to overeating.

Dieting may make teens feel:

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

Some forms of dieting can be dangerous to the health of children and youth, such as skipping meals, using weight loss pills or laxatives, going on 'crash' diets or vomiting after eating.

Teens are still growing and need the right amount of nutrients to be healthy. Eliminating entire food groups or taking in too few calories when they are still developing can have serious negative effects on their health and on their concentration abilities needed for educational activities.

It is common, and normal, for teens to feel self-conscious about their appearance, but constantly 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 who have a negative body image often lack confidence in other areas of their lives as well. Discuss this with your teen. It could be a phase or you may be picking up on a more serious problem such as an eating disorder. Healthy weight for height can easily be plotted during regular medical visits and is an excellent visual tool to reassure teens or to detect warning signals. If you are concerned, have your teen see her doctor.

Many teens who are preoccupied with their weight have parents who are also preoccupied with their weight. Consider your own eating and weight control behaviours. What kind of role model are you? Do your attitudes about food and your body tell your teen that it's normal to worry about your weight?

Here are some suggestions for parents, teachers, coaches and other mentors to help teens who are preoccupied with their weight or who are dieting:

- Find out why they are dieting and what effect it is having on their lives.
- Acknowledge what they feel by letting them know that you understand the pressures to be thin.
- Help teens challenge media norms about how we are supposed to look.
- Advise teens that dieting doesn't work and may lead to overeating.
- Learn to praise teens (girls especially) for qualities other than appearance.
- For coaches, be aware that your comments about weight may be very powerful. Direct or indirect suggestions that weight loss would enhance performance can be very damaging to young athletes.
- Enjoy all four food groups every day. Following Canada's Food Guide can be helpful.
- Encourage teens to be active everyday.
- Be a positive role model by showing that you accept your own body's shape and size, as well as that of others.
- Be a positive role model by eating healthy, balanced meals and snacks, and by being physically active.

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