

# tool kit for teen care

## Media and Body Image



The media (television, radio, news) play a large, and often negative, role in shaping young women's ideas about how they should look to be attractive. The physical images presented in the media are difficult, if not impossible, for most women to achieve. Even though these media images may represent unhealthy conditions, they lead adolescents to think that their own bodies are not acceptable. Growing numbers of young women risk their health, and life, trying to imitate the body images presented by the media. The wrong media messages also can harm mental self-image and self-esteem.

### How common are unhealthy body images?

- The media generally show underweight women as the ideal body type. The average model today is 25% thinner than the national average weight, and actually only represents 5% of females in the country.
- Almost 54% of American young girls and women aged 12–23 years are unhappy with their bodies.
- One third of high-school students thought they were overweight when they were not.
- Roughly 75% of girls as young as 9 years have dieted from two to five times in a given year.
- At any given time, 5–10 million women and girls have eating disorders that harm their health, including anorexia nervosa (starving themselves) and bulimia (binge eating and purging). (See "Weight and Adolescent Females" Fact Sheet.)
- Females make up 90–95% of adolescents with an eating disorder.
- Teens think about more than just weight. They also think they aren't pretty enough.
  - In 1998, nearly 25,000 cosmetic procedures were performed on teens.
  - Rhinoplasty (nose job), breast enlargement, and liposuction (surgical removal of fat) were among the most common procedures.

### What are the warning signs of a teen with an unhealthy body image?

- A young woman who views herself only in terms of her physical looks may have an unhealthy or unrealistic self-image.
- The language young women use to describe themselves and their physical development and attractiveness may show that they have a negative view of their body image.
- Eating disorders and excessive dieting may be caused from unhealthy attempts to live up to body images presented in the media.
- Worries about sexual attractiveness may result from poor body image and concerns about self-worth.
- Depression and low self-esteem can be signs of an unhealthy body image.

### What can be done to improve body image?

- Adolescents should be encouraged to form realistic descriptions of their bodies and to base self-esteem on a wide range of personal traits.
  - Teens should become informed about healthy physical development and individual differences.
  - Teens should be encouraged to eat a healthy diet and exercise to maintain good health.
  - Teens should be encouraged to develop their personalities and other nonphysical attributes. Each young person should be valued as an individual.
  - Girls should be encouraged to get involved in scheduled activities.
  - Girls should be encouraged to get involved in sports, because girls in sports tend to have higher levels of self-esteem.
  - Girls should be encouraged to get involved in extracurricular activities that are not related to looks.



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- Efforts to decrease the influence of the media in presenting unrealistic models of how women should look should be undertaken.
  - Children and adolescents should be helped to identify media messages that are inaccurate and unhealthy.
  - Teens should be aware of the media messages aimed at women and young people. Images seen on television and other media sources can be used as a way to open discussions between parents and children.
  - Adolescents can be helped to develop healthy patterns regarding the amount and content of the media they come in contact with.
  - The public should speak out against the negative and physically harmful ways the media portrays women.
  - The use of negative terms that are body related, such as fat and ugly, should be discouraged.

### For More Information

We have provided information on the following organizations and web sites because they have information that may be of interest to our readers. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists does not necessarily endorse the views expressed or the facts presented by these organizations or on these web sites. Further, ACOG does not endorse any commercial products that may be advertised or available from these organizations or on these web sites.

**American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**  
409 12th Street SW  
PO Box 96920  
Washington, DC 20090-6290  
Telephone: (202) 863-2497  
Fax: (202) 484-3917  
[www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org)

**American Society of Plastic Surgeons**  
Plastic Surgery Educational Foundation  
444 East Algonquin Road  
Arlington Heights, IL 60005  
Telephone: 888-4-PLASTIC (888-475-2784)  
[www.plasticsurgery.org](http://www.plasticsurgery.org)

**The Center for Educational Priorities, "Various Resources for Media Criticism"**  
[www.CDP.org/resources.html](http://www.CDP.org/resources.html)

**Center for Media Literacy**  
3101 Ocean Park Boulevard, Suite 200  
Santa Monica, CA 90405  
Telephone: 800-226-9494  
[www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)

**Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, Inc.**  
603 Stewart Street, Suite 803  
Seattle, WA 98101  
Telephone: (206) 382-3587  
[www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

**Girl Power!**  
Telephone: 800-729-6686  
[www.health.org/gpower](http://www.health.org/gpower)

**National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders**  
PO Box 7  
Highland Park, IL 60035  
Telephone: (847) 831-3438  
[www.anad.org](http://www.anad.org)

**National Organization for Women "Love Your Body Campaign"**  
National Organization for Women Foundation  
733 15th Street, NW, Second Floor,  
Washington, DC 20005  
Telephone: (202) 628-8669  
[www.nowfoundation.org](http://www.nowfoundation.org)

**The National Women's Health Information Center**  
8550 Arlington Boulevard, Suite 300  
Fairfax, VA 22031  
Telephone: 800-994-WOMAN  
[www.4woman.gov](http://www.4woman.gov)