

# UNHEALTHY CHOICES

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# THE BULK OF THE PROBLEM

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**Content warning: this article contains mentions of eating and body image disorders.**

His alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m. It's time to go to the gym. He drags himself out of bed to the kitchen and groggily makes himself a shake for breakfast, scooping multiple cups of protein and supplements into the mixture.

He arrives and immediately grabs a pair of weights, completing a grueling workout. When he can barely do another curl, he heads home.

The next day, when he looks in the mirror, he's unhappy. He wants to be bigger, more muscular. So he repeats his routine, hoping he can finally bulk up.

The goal of a perfectly sculpted, muscular body is a common one for teenage boys. Influenced by their peers and what they see online, many feel the desire or pressure to build up their bodies.

"A lot of my friends definitely want to appear muscular," said Charlie Smith\*, a senior at Carlmont.

Smith and many of his friends dedicate time to working on their bodies. Many of them lift weights regularly and follow protein-heavy diets to help them increase muscle mass, a common trend among teens.

"I would say most of my friends have some sort of protein-based diet and workout. It's something that's typical for a lot of guys," Smith said. "I think fitness is becoming a little bit more trendy now. People are getting into the gym, and a lot of that is due to social media. You see people on social media bulking and gaining weight to lift stronger and get bigger, and it kind of just makes you want to do it."

The prevalence of these kinds of images and videos on popular platforms like TikTok and Instagram is staggering. For a teenage boy, it is incredibly likely that their pages will contain content of workouts, gym videos, supplements, and diets, all with the promise of a muscular body type — a body that can be unattainable for some.

"All body types are different, and there is no 'one size fits all' for everyone," said Heidi Flaig, a registered nurse at Carlmont.

"Adolescence is a time of rapid changes within your body physically and mentally, and it is important to focus on overall well-being. But, it can be very tempting for boys to look up to others with that body type and hope to mirror it. I think social media plays a huge role in perpetuating unrealistic expectations and body 'ideals.'"

When social media constantly pushes this content out to young, impressionable males, it becomes easy for them to feel pressure to look the same. Not unlike the millions of pictures of slim women with hourglass bodies that wreck the self-esteem of many young girls, these images and videos of broad chests, rock hard abs, and enormous shoulders that swarm magazines, movies, and even video games can have poor effects on the self-confidence and body image of boys who feel they need to meet that standard.

"A lot of guys I know struggle with body dysmorphia and image," Smith said. "Some of my friends have expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies due to lack of muscle. It's almost an inside joke within the lifting community. Almost everyone actually gets increased body dysmorphia when they start lifting weights."

This kind of dissatisfaction can lead to habits that quickly get out of hand. Innocent behaviors like exercising and trying to eat well soon spiral into obsessive, self-consuming thoughts and lead to more dangerous actions.

That's not to say that working out and eating healthy, nutrient-rich foods are bad behaviors. In many cases, the gym can be a supportive place for teens to lead a good, positive lifestyle.

"Guys mostly go and work out together, and it always seems very positive and filled with personal goals, and having a good time," said Sarah Jackson\*, who has friends that lift. "I see them correcting each other's form or cheering for their friends when they meet a goal."

Smith shared similar sentiments to Jackson.

"Fitness is definitely not a bad thing. It can be social and encourages people to do things that are scientifically proven to be good for you, like exercising a little every day."

However, with these behaviors, there is a fine balance

between health and harm. Goals can soon turn into obsessions. For many boys, working out becomes more about the aesthetic reward than just doing something positive. This can lead down a slippery slope.

"I still know plenty of people who lift weights and work out because they enjoy it, and it keeps them healthy," Jackson said. "But a lot of times, the emphasis changes to be on actually seeing results, which can definitely become concerning."

The fixation on results can lead many boys to be at risk of turning to unhealthy mechanisms like severely restrictive diets, compulsive workouts, supplements, and even steroids if unsatisfied.

"The true physical health risks are what boys sometimes do to attain muscle growth," said Dr. Robin Drucker, a pediatrician at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation. "Some are severely restricting their food intake. Some are even taking steroids and supplements, such as creatine, which are not studied in teens and are not FDA regulated. We have seen permanent kidney damage in some kids taking creatine, and there can be liver damage with other supplements."

According to a study conducted by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Harvard University, boys and young men struggle with body image at much higher rates than previously thought. Of 2460 18 to 32-year-old men surveyed, 10% struggled with a severe body image disorder. Many admitted to being unhappy with at least one aspect of their bodies, felt guilty if a workout was missed, or were tempted to try anabolic

steroids.

This kind of body dysmorphia and unhealthy pursuit for a more muscular body type is becoming so common that doctors have started to coin it "bigorexia."

"This is a health condition that has parallels with anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders and dysmorphia conditions. This can affect every aspect of life as people are consumed by thoughts of their bodies," Flaig said. "This can take up a lot of space mentally as well as physically. They may be restricting what they are eating, over-exercising, participating in other risky behaviors such as taking steroids, and may not be getting the proper nutrients and pushing their body to limits beyond its capacity. All of these can be damaging to physical and mental health."



The line between health and obsession can be a difficult one to see.

"Any exercise or diet regimen that becomes "obsessive" is unhealthy, but the definition of what is obsessive is difficult," Drucker said. "I usually tell my patients that if more than half of their thoughts per day revolve around food, exercise, and what their body looks like, then this counts as obsessive."

On top of this, eating disorders and body dysmorphia are rarely talked about among males, and many boys are unaware and not knowledgeable that their behaviors are problematic.

"I don't think the conversation about these topics for guys is where it needs to be," Smith said. "I hadn't heard of bigorexia or that kind of thing before in guys, but talking about it makes me realize that there are some people I know who are kind of toeing the line."

In Drucker's mind, there are definite warning signs and behaviors that people can look out for to identify and help prevent these unhealthy practices.

"If you know guys who are always talking about their bodies, wanting to try new things to bulk up, or commenting daily on their diet, that can hint at a deeper problem," Drucker said. "Just like any eating disorder, this shares a lot of qualities with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), so watch for those signs as well."

\*Smith and Jackson's names have been changed to protect them from any potential negative or false associations and assumptions based on the content. Their anonymity is in accordance with Carlmont Media's Anonymous Sourcing Policy.

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**- Dr. Robin Drucker**



# THE REAL WEIGHT OF DIET CULTURE

KAT TSVIRKUNOVA

Walking down a grocery store aisle can be a nerve-racking experience. Choosing between the produce section or the chips and sugary snacks is often an either-or battle.

Choosing the chips would mean consuming extra fats and calories, a sin in today's diet culture. It would imply that you are letting yourself go, losing control of your body, and ruining your appearance. At least, that's what diet culture tells us.

Diet culture is the widely held belief that physical appearance and body shape are more important than physical, psychological, and overall well-being. It's the idea that limiting what and how much you eat will help you control your body, particularly your diet.

You may not realize you have been a victim of diet culture.

When you catch yourself eating something you have been craving and saying, "I can eat this, I haven't had anything else all day," or, "I had a hard workout; these calories don't count."

Or, observe how many advertisements and articles promote detoxes or cleanses to "reset" or purge our bodies of "bad" food choices after any major holiday.

Both of these examples are obvious influences of diet culture.

"When you're thinking of why you're eating food or engaging in certain behaviors and thoughts, what is the reason behind it?" asked Lauren Smolar, vice president of the National Eating Disorders Association programs. "Are you doing it because your body is craving the food you need right now for nourishment? Or are you doing it because you feel it is the right thing to do? Is it that society has told you that choice is the better choice—even though your body might be telling you that there is a different option that it needs right now?"

Diet culture categorizes foods as good or bad and encourages thinking of food as transactional—something earned or that isn't deserved based on how a person has eaten or exercised.

People conditioned to accept diet culture as a normalized part of life may have a negative self-image, engage in negative self-talk regularly, and glorify thinness. They might also have an all-or-nothing attitude.

The notion that food is merely fuel and has to be earned is toxic and can lead to disordered eating.

According to a 2008 survey conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 75% of women reported disordered eating habits, making disordered eating the status quo in the United States for women of all ages and races.

Trying to eat only "good" food can be classified as orthorexia, a severe case of clean eating. It is characterized by an obsessive focus on what a person considers the "right" diet. This obsession interferes with daily life, including social, emotional, and other factors.

Diet culture is linked to orthorexia because it encourages people to stray away from foods or confine their diet.

Avoiding gluten when you do not have an intolerance or allergy, extreme veganism, extreme low-fat or low-carbohydrate diets, detoxes, cleanses, and avoiding all GMOs or non-organic foods are some examples.

Orthorexia can progress to anorexia nervosa and obsessive-compulsive disorders, including body dysmorphic disorder.

The key issues with diet culture are that it promotes discrimination against people with larger bodies, fuels a business designed to take your money, sets you up for feeling like a failure, and normalizes disordered eating.

People and corporations are constantly profiting from and creating insecurities revolving around body image. A whole market is built upon believing that people must be thinner and change their appearances.

When people are self-conscious about their bodies and appearance, they are more likely to purchase a diet product, a “low-calorie” food item, exercise equipment, shapewear, an exercise program, a gym membership, etc. Diet culture compels exercise abuse, particularly in the fitness industry, such as purchasing exercise equipment to target problem areas. For example, someone influenced by diet culture is more likely to buy ankle weights if they are insecure about their ankles.

Foods are labeled with terms like plant-based, organic, gluten-free, and fresh to make them sound healthier than their often cheaper counterparts. However, pesticides are still used on

organic food, and gluten-free food is frequently loaded with sugar and salt to make it taste better.

Furthermore, celebrity endorsements of detox teas and appetite-suppressing lollipops never reveal the entire picture. Understand that when a celebrity endorses a diet or fitness product, it is not the product giving them that body. They have far more access to resources than is made public, such as chefs, dietitians, and fitness trainers.

There is no “right” body size, and even if there were, it would be out of reach for whoever does the “right” thing or follows the “right” weight-loss trend at the time because diets fail 98% of the time, according to the US Federal Trade Commission. They are designed to make more money for the diet industry than help people lose weight.

This statistic alone exemplifies the no-win norm that everyone is socialized to accept. Diet culture encourages people to feel bad about themselves and pass judgment onto others while also implying that losing weight will make them feel better.

The reality is food is far more than just fuel. It is an essential social and cultural aspect of our lives. Fixating on food as energy prevents you from appreciating and experiencing food as a more profound part of your life.

So, next time you are in the grocery store, walk down any aisle you like.

