
Mirror, mirror

Diabetes and Body Image

Mirror, mirror on the wall...

What do you see when you look in the mirror?

People come in many different shapes, sizes and weights, yet you may feel pressure to look a certain way. You are not alone. Everyday we see pictures of movie stars and fashion models in the media who look natural, beautiful and healthy. In fact, most of these images have been altered by computers to make these people look more muscular or thinner than they really are. It's time to separate fact from fiction and understand what a healthy weight really is!

Healthy weight is not a single number, but rather a range based on many factors. These factors include your height, age, the size of your bones and whether or not you are still growing. Your weight is also influenced by your parents' size and shape. More importantly, a healthy weight differs from one person to the next. Comparing yourself to movie stars and fashion models can make you unhappy with your own shape and size. It can cause unhealthy worries about weight, a poor self-image or even an eating disorder. Unfortunately, eating disorders are becoming more common and are occurring at younger ages. They develop slowly, so sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between healthy weight concerns or a distorted body image and an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are serious illnesses that harm a person's mind and body. They cause people to become obsessed with their body image and weight. You may have heard of the two main types – anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. People with anorexia nervosa severely limit their food intake or increase their exercise to lose weight and/or to stay thin. They have a distorted view of their body and do not know how a healthy, normal body should look. Anorexia can cause malnutrition, depression, osteoporosis and heart failure and can be fatal. People with bulimia nervosa frequently eat large amounts of food (sometimes known as food binging), and then use harmful methods to lose weight, including self-induced vomiting and/or excessive exercise. Both of these eating disorders are much more dangerous than being overweight.



The challenge of diabetes

Managing diabetes involves balancing food and activity with insulin and/or diabetes pills. People newly diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, and occasionally those with type 2 diabetes, often lose weight in the days, weeks or even months before diabetes is diagnosed. Weight loss from undiagnosed diabetes is unhealthy and dangerous. Once a person is diagnosed with diabetes and starts taking insulin injections, they usually regain some or all of the weight that was lost. This is normal and expected. It is also an important sign that good health is returning. This is true even if a person's body weight before diagnosis was higher than average.

People with existing diabetes may also gain weight if they improve their blood glucose control. This is also a positive sign. Any improvement in blood glucose levels and glycosylated hemoglobin (A1C) tests are very important in reducing the risks of developing long-term complications of diabetes. Having diabetes can make anyone, especially children, teenagers and young adults feel as if they have lost control over their lives. At a time when young people desire more freedom, a teenager with diabetes often needs his/her parent(s) to help support their diabetes care. Sometimes parents are so worried about their teen's diabetes that they may become overprotective. Struggles about food and independence are normal. Keep the lines of communication open. Ask for help from your healthcare team.

Body image problems, eating disorders and "food fights" harm diabetes control. This can increase the risks of developing long-term complications much sooner than they might otherwise happen.

Are you at risk for an eating disorder?

Some early warning signs of body image problems or eating disorders in people with diabetes are:

- Large, unexplained swings in blood glucose levels
 - Frequent unexplained high blood glucose
 - Frequent unexplained low blood glucose, including after meals
- Obsession with food, weight and body shape
 - Wanting to lose an unhealthy amount of weight
 - Refusing to gain weight or keep a normal body weight
 - Wanting to change meal plans often, or eat only low fat foods
- Worry or stress about eating
- Vomiting for no clear reason
- Not taking the recommended insulin doses
- Refusing to allow a parent to see insulin injections being given
- Late or delayed puberty