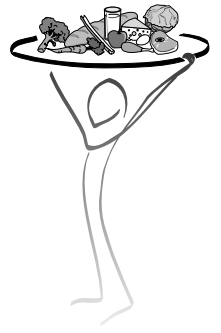


Physique and Body Image: A Guide for Coaches and Parents of Athletes in School and Community Sports



As adolescent boys and girls mature, self-consciousness about their bodies increases. In athletic adolescents, pressures to optimize performance, meet unrealistic body weight/fat goals, societal expectations, and established norms for certain sports (Table 1), all influence athletes' desire to attain a certain body shape. Although athletes recognize the importance of food for good health, research indicates that they are more concerned with nutrition as a means of attaining an ideal appearance. This preoccupation usually translates into poor eating habits, disordered eating, unrealistic weight goals, and eventually malnutrition.

TABLE 1

Sports that emphasize a low body weight/lean physique perceived to offer a competitive advantage.

Judged Sports	Endurance Sports (low weight is thought to aid in speed)	Weight Category Sports
Gymnastics Diving Figure skating Ballet/dance Synchronized swimming	Distance running Cross-country Skiing Swimming	Wrestling Boxing Karate Powerlifting Rowing

DISORDERED EATING BEHAVIOURS: THE SIGNS

- ✓ Pre-occupation with body weight/size, food/calories
- ✓ Mood swings and irritability
- ✓ Inability to focus or concentrate on the task
- ✓ Compulsive/excessive exercise even though tired or injured
- ✓ Weight loss plus loss of lean muscle mass can lead to a decrease in optimum performance
- ✓ Blames inconsistent/poor performance on body weight
- ✓ Preoccupation with eating behaviours of others
- ✓ Excessive fear of being overweight
- ✓ Avoids food-related social activities
- ✓ Chronic fatigue/illnesses
- ✓ Slow recovery following a workout

TABLE 2 – RISKS OF DISORDER EATING

On Health	On Performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Nutrient deficiencies ✓ Fatigue and lethargy ✓ Frequent infections/illness ✓ Menstrual dysfunction ✓ Decreased bone mineral density 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Early muscular fatigue ✓ Reduced mental capacity ✓ Dehydration ✓ Reduced lean body mass: decreased anaerobic capacity, endurance, and strength ✓ Frequent injuries ✓ Erratic performance

WHAT CAN COACHES AND PARENTS DO TO FOSTER HEALTHY BODY IMAGE PERCEPTIONS AMONG ATHLETES?

1. **Promote and foster healthful eating behaviours.** Avoid discussing body weight/composition with athletes and focus on healthy dietary practices for optimal performance. Identify the factors affecting their food choices.
2. **Endorse reliable education programs** focused on dispelling myths around body weight, dieting, and performance.
3. **Recognize and encourage the athlete's individuality.** Acknowledge individual physiological and nutritional differences.

