

BODY IMAGE: The fine line between love and hate

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Montana Kaimin The hydrostatic weighing scale in Mill Hall evaluates body density by measuring the amount of water displaced when a person is submerged.

Cassandra Eliasson/Kaimin

Women across campus who are starving themselves into a size six and emulating stick-thin celebrities aren't alone. A growing number of college women suffer from eating disorders, and studies say these women may be endangering their health in the pursuit of perfection.

"College students are in an age group that develops an alarming rate of eating disorders because they become extremely peer conscious," said Nancy Fitch, director of UM's Student Health Services. "In college, there is enormous pressure to look good and the media tells us what good looks like. Most often, good is unhealthily thin."

According to the National Eating Disorder Screening Program, 1,000 women die from eating disorders every year and 15 percent of all young women (18-30) have disordered eating patterns. Four percent of all college age women have been diagnosed with bulimia nervosa, and many more suffer from other disorders, including anorexia nervosa, reported a study conducted by the Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders Inc.

Fitch attributes the rise of eating disorders in college students to the overwhelming pressure from peer groups and society's expectations for the perfect body.

Fitch said eating disorders are especially common in underclassmen, who have been uprooted from their comfortable group of friends and forced to build new relationships, making them self-conscious about their bodies.

"College is really a developmental stage. Students are just starting to create their own values and they are trying on a lot of identities," Fitch said. "They are in a process of reinventing themselves and how they look plays a big role in that."

Teresa White, personal trainer and aquatics director at the Women's Club in Missoula, said the issue of body image and eating disorders may run deeper in college women than most think, sometimes starting in childhood. White said beauty expectations that stem from early adolescence and childhood play a huge role in the development of eating disorders. But the increased pressure college students face make them more likely to turn these unhealthy expectations into a full-blown eating disorder.

"I think expectations for beauty start very early, then they build up and we don't teach girls how to deal with that pressure until they are faced with having to deal with it," said White, whose 16-year-old daughter

is battling an eating disorder. "But there are so many other things out there that figure in as well. Beyond looking a certain way, you have to be superwoman in everything. That kind of pressure feeds into it and women feel out of control, and eating is something they can control."

Most anorexics and bulimics are over-achievers, who incorporate their body in a drive for success. Often, perfectionists can't meet this self-imposed ideal. This leads to a negative body image, which is ultimately the major cause of eating disorders.

PREVENTION OF EATING DISORDERS

White and her colleague, Kathy Mangan, also a personal trainer at the Women's Club, both said preventing eating disorders means establishing a positive view of the whole self, not just the body. But developing a positive body image is no simple task.

Mangan said every woman, regardless of age, economic level or social status, has body issues. "We are all at different levels of dealing with our own body image. It just depends on how far along we have come," Mangan said.

Mangan said women can start developing more realistic expectations by glancing at a family photo album.

"I think the hardest thing, because there is such a strong genetic component in how you are put together and how you are shaped, is to look back into your family to see what your mother, and your grandmother look like," said Mangan. "You have to look at who you take after to find out what you can truly expect your body, in the best case scenario, to look like."

Women have to learn young to love their bodies, Mangan said.

"I think one of the things we can do as adults to help prevent eating disorders is to be aware of how impressionable young girls are," she said. "Girls are dieting in the fourth grade. We need to realize how detrimental that is to young girls and stop it before it gets worse."

White said sports and related programs can help young women place their focus on health, instead of aesthetic beauty.

"I think early programs, in middle schools and high schools, that focus on feeling good about yourself and feeling strong will really make a difference in the attitudes of young girls," White said. "Athletics especially can take away the focus that says we are doing this to look better,' and replace it with we are doing this to be strong, to be well-grounded and to be healthy."

SO WHAT IS HEALTHY?

Methods such as height weight proportions, Body Mass Index (BMI) and fat analysis can help determine what is "healthy" and what is not.

But being healthy has nothing to do with the size of a woman's thigh, the circumference of her waist, her weight or even her body fat percentage, said White and Mangan.

Many health clubs provide an initial figure analysis for new members that calculates weight and height proportions and body fat percentages. This, according to health club owners and directors, gives the individual a starting point, but with many women, it just makes them feel overwhelmed, which Mangan and White say is a defeatist approach to a health program.

"We really cringe when a client asks for a body fat measurement," White said. "Because numbers really don't mean anything."

"But, even when you fight doing it, women think they need to know," Mangan said. "I just try to let them know how inaccurate they are. Even in the best case scenario there are big margins of error. It is just a number; you can't live and die by it. I'd rather measure progress in how a person feels than how many percentage points they dropped during a program."

Brent Ruby, associate professor at UM's Health and Human Performance department, also said body fat measurements don't accurately measure the overall success of a fitness or nutrition program.

"Granted, you don't want your fat to go up, but more importantly, you have to watch to see if your fat-free mass has gone down," Ruby said. "If it has, you aren't doing things correctly. That is like taking a four-wheel-drive and putting a smaller engine in it."

Not only does a body fat percentage give you a false sense of success, but more often than not, the readings are severely inaccurate. In researching for this story, I had three different sources analyze my body fat, and I received three very different readings. I am nineteen years old, 5'5" and by my

own scale, I weigh 130 pounds. At Slender Lady, I was measured at 31 percent body fat, which is considered overweight by medical guidelines. A week later, at Curves for Women, I dropped 10 percentage points when my reading showed up as 20.4 percent. Finally, Carla Cox, a nutritionist at the Western Montana Clinic and a professor of nutrition at UM, measured me at 23 percent, which is within a healthy range for a woman my age.

A plethora of methods on the market calculate body fat, and none of the methods are perfect. The most popular is the skin fold method, which uses calipers to pinch fat on five different body parts: the back, thigh, abdomen high hip, or "love handle," and upper arm. Other methods include hydrostatic weighing, considered by some to be the gold standard. In this method, a person is submerged into a tank of water and their body density is measured by how much water is displaced.

A third method, popular with health club chains such as Curves for Women and Slender Lady, is the bioelectrical impedance method. In this method, a low intensity electrical current is sent throughout the body. Since the current will travel faster through lean tissue, a formula can help determine how much fat is in the body. As with other methods, many factors can affect results of the bioelectrical technique, including how hydrated the body is — which can be affected by urinating within just a few hours — whether the subject has consumed alcohol within the last 48 hours and how long ago the subject last ate.

The main concern with body fat measurement is that they are all estimates.

"Body fat analysis is almost always inaccurate unless you know the ins and the outs of the methodology," Ruby said. "With skinfold measurements, I'd say 90 percent of the readings are inaccurate and in Missoula, about 100 percent are done incorrectly."

Ruby stated that the only true way to calculate fat and lean tissue would be to have a bone-mineral X-ray and lean tissue analysis done with the help of CAT scans and body density readings, which he approximated would cost around \$500-\$600 dollars.

But body experts recommend eating a balanced diet and using the body for what it is made for — movement. Exercise is key to not only maintaining a healthy body, but a healthy body image as well. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends 20-60 minutes of physical activity three to five days a week. But no one has to shell out cash to go to the gym for a daily workout, Ruby said. "I encourage people to get creative with their workouts. You don't have to go to the gym to get a workout," Ruby said.

"Take the farthest parking spot and walk, or don't let the neighbor kids mow the lawn or rake the leaves. That is free physical activity," he said.

Mangan said people interested in starting a fitness regimen need to recognize the reasons for the implementation.

"You have to look at what makes you happy in your everyday life," Mangan said. "What can you do physically that you enjoy? Can you garden, can you run, can you parasail? You have to ask yourself, what are the things you want to do with your body? Then you have to decide if you are physically able to do them. That is what fitness is about. Rather than being worried about what your body looks like, be worried about what it can do."