



Thin doesn't always mean healthy if nutrition ignored

Many societal pressures in our community have the potential to push individuals into unnatural and unhealthful eating habits in their drive to be thin. Abnormal thinness often is considered to be attractive, desirable and healthy. However, thinness is not equivalent to health, especially when the pursuit of thinness goes too far.

The basic drive to eat is part of the foundation for survival in all animals. Healthy people, of course, share this drive to consume enough food to meet both nutritional and energy needs. For our ancestors, adequate nutrition was required for the energy needed to acquire enough food and to carry out successful reproduction.

In some respects, contemporary survival has become more complicated. The common mono-focus on being ultrathin (particularly for females) supports short-term societal success at the expense of long-term health.

Question: How does the drive for thinness generate health problems?

Answer: When less food is eaten, the supply of essential nutrients declines. Over time this can lead to marginal or severe nutrient deficiencies that compromise many body functions, including brain

function. The normal function of the human brain is dependent on finely balanced complex chemistry.

When the brain's chemistry is altered, so are perception and judgment. This is obvious when mind-altering drugs are taken, but not so clear when the chemistry is altered by a gradual change in the supply of key nutrients. The impact on one's life, however, can be extreme and persistent. Dietary changes that initially seem to have health benefits can lead to serious health problems when the body's nutrient reserves are drained over time. These nutrient deficiencies can affect overall energy level and put stresses on the body that lead to accelerated aging.

Q: What societal factors are used by individuals as excuses for their unhealthy leanness or disordered eating?

A: To legitimize disordered eating behaviors, individuals often justify their food choices within the context of healthy-eating that limits their calorie intake. For example, adopting vegetarian or vegan diets can provide a good excuse to avoid some animal foods that are high in calories. Limiting foods to organic and sustainable choices can further limit the number of

foods considered to be acceptable for consumption.

On the surface, the act of eating safe and healthful foods that do not harm the environment is laudable. But, as the number of acceptable foods declines in the drive to thinness, the risk of nutrient deficiencies increases substantially.

Even the MyPlate food guidance system can be misused by limiting the variety of choices within food groups to low-calorie, high-fiber options that meet the "letter of the law" but not the overall intent of meeting nutrient needs with a variety of foods. Of course, concern for the growing waistline of America gives yet another reason for limiting caloric intake.

Q: What other means do individuals with eating disorders use to support unhealthful weight obsession?

A: Individuals are going to extreme websites that serve as support groups for anorexics, providing tips on how to lose excessive body weight. These are frequently called pro-ana (pro-anorexia) and pro-mia (pro-bulimia) websites. If you know someone visiting these websites, take a good look at their eating habits and encourage them to get professional help before it is too late.

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