

The dangers of the 'ballerina body'

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With actress Natalie Portman in Oscar contention, the movie “Black Swan” has taken center stage. So have concerns surrounding the dramatic weight loss Portman underwent for the role. Her depiction of a dangerously thin ballerina sheds light on a potential downside of this art form.

“Ballerinas are often plagued by perfectionism, social anxiety and pressures to be graceful and agile,” said Aparna Sharma, MD, who specializes in treating eating disorders at Loyola University Health System. “This culture can push dancers to their physical limit and increase the risk for body image issues and eating disorders.”

Dr. Sharma reports that many dance companies and schools require their students to participate in mandatory weigh-ins, which exacerbate the problem. The form-fitting wardrobe and presence of mirrors in dance studios also add to the pressure to be thin.

Extreme weight-loss common in dancers can deprive the body of nutrients necessary to function. Severe calorie restriction also can cause: fatigue; mood swings; cognitive impairment; phobias; obsessions and compulsions; decreased blood pressure; dizziness; decreased heart rate; poor immune functioning; seizures; renal failure; bowel obstruction; stress fractures; decreased muscle mass; increased body hair; decreased brain size; osteoporosis and infertility.

Ballet dancers and young girls in general with eating disorders also tend to be more sensitive and self-critical with lower self-esteem. Dr. Sharma

believes these girls should be taught the dangers of excessive weight loss and overexercising to curb the potentially devastating physical and emotional effects of eating disorders.

“Dance companies and schools should make counseling and educational sessions on healthy eating and exercise habits mandatory for their students. Stress-reduction techniques, such as yoga and meditation, also provide valuable tools for young girls struggling with eating disorders,” Dr. Sharma said. “My hope is that the alarming body images portrayed in ‘Black Swan’ may raise awareness about this issue and help our society recognize when interventions are needed.”

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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