

Teens who check the scale frequently may have an unhealthy preoccupation with weight

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Teens who weigh themselves several times per week may be at risk for unhealthy weight control practices and poor psychological well-being, according to a new study.

While earlier studies have shown that self-weighing can be an effective weight management tool for adults, the same may not hold true for younger people, says lead author Virginia Quick, Ph.D., of the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health.

“Adolescents and [young adults](#) face a lot of pressure from society to fit the ideal body weight or shape,” she adds. “But the number on the scale is not the only measure of overall health.”

Adolescents who check the scale repeatedly are more likely to engage in extreme weight loss methods — like fasting, binge eating, or vomiting — than other young adults.

They may also try muscle-building products such as steroids, creatine, and hormone supplements. The study, which appears in *Journal of Adolescent Health*, is one of the first to question teens about these potentially dangerous substances.

Psychological issues related to frequent self-weighing include depression and low self-esteem for young women, and poor body satisfaction for young men.

The study also shows that frequent self-weighing is associated with healthy [weight-control](#) practices, such as dietary improvements and exercise. These findings may present a conundrum for many health care providers, who are intent on fighting obesity by urging everyone to step on the scale regularly.

“Before recommending self-weighing as a weight-monitoring tool, health care providers should ensure that young adults are not at risk for an unhealthy preoccupation with body weight or shape,” advise the study authors.

Clinicians and parents should encourage a broader view of good psychological and physical health by asking teens about their happiness, energy levels, and body image, Quick adds.

The new findings are based on a survey completed by nearly 2,300 young [adults](#) who first reported their weight control behaviors 10 years ago as public-school students in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. About 18 percent of young women and 12 percent of young men reported weighing themselves a few times per week or more.

“Self-monitoring of weight should not be a prescription for everyone without doing some screening first,” notes Michelle Dionne, Ph.D., who studies the psychology of eating at Ryerson University in Toronto. “There is a certain percentage of the population who will use that feedback and engage in unhealthy behaviors.”

Teens in particular are prone to risky behaviors in all areas of life, Dionne adds. She calls for further research into the psychological vulnerabilities — such as low self-esteem, anxiety, or neuroticism — of people who pursue weight loss goals at any cost.

“We have to do something about the obesity crisis, but if you don’t provide people with the tools, resources, and information they need to implement proper [weight](#) control then you’re just creating another mess,” she concludes.

More information: Quick, V. et al. 2012. Self-Weighing Behaviors in Young Adults: Tipping the Scale Toward Unhealthy Eating Behaviors? *Journal of Adolescent Health*.
[dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.02.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.02.008)

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