

Study suggests body dissatisfaction begins before adolescence, remains constant into adulthood

August 26 2019



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Up to 46% of adolescents in the United States report feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, which can lead to eating disorders, obesity, poor

mental health and other serious problems.

A study involving University of Minnesota School of Public Health data and researchers found evidence body [dissatisfaction](#) begins before adolescence and remains constant at least until age 30. Their findings were recently published in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*.

Researchers analyzed [survey data](#) from 1,455 Project EAT participants who have routinely completed surveys about their eating, weight, and mental health as well as other aspects of well-being every five years. Participants completed the surveys between approximately age 15-30 and are now providing researchers with snapshots of participants' health at different phases of development.

The analysis showed:

- body dissatisfaction increased slightly over time for both men and women, however, the trend is attributed to people who also experienced gradual weight gains;
- nearly 95% of participants fell into two patterns:
 - - consistently high body dissatisfaction beginning in adolescence but slightly decreasing into adulthood
 - consistently low body dissatisfaction beginning in adolescence but slightly increasing into adulthood
 - the remaining two patterns that emerged were:
 - starting with high body dissatisfaction, decreasing during adolescence, then increasing into adulthood
 - starting with low body dissatisfaction, increasing during adolescence, then decreasing into adulthood

"The findings seem to suggest that body dissatisfaction develops and becomes relatively fixed even before adolescence," said study lead Shirley Wang, a Ph.D. student at Harvard University. "The numbers remain stable from the start of the surveys in adolescence all the way into adulthood, and even the groups that fluctuate return to their initial levels."

"Having a positive body image is integral to positive well-being during adolescence, when one is developing a sense of self-identity. It can be challenging, however, due to rapid growth and many [physical changes](#) during this period and the many [social pressures](#) that young people face to conform to a certain ideal," said the study's senior author and director of Project EAT Professor Dianne Neumark-Sztainer.

Wang said the fluctuating patterns could be explained by factors such as social influence. For example, those who started low and fluctuated reported that they had peers who were dieting during adolescence and young adulthood, which may have temporarily changed how they felt about their own bodies.

In response to these new findings, Wang recommends that the public health community develop or adapt [body](#) dissatisfaction prevention programs to suit children and address the problem sooner. She also said the results provide evidence that there may be a window in childhood or early adolescence when ideas about the self and self-image are developing. Understanding the window could be a path for related research to help refine the targeting of future interventions.

Provided by University of Minnesota

Citation: Study suggests body dissatisfaction begins before adolescence, remains constant into adulthood (2019, August 26) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-08-body-dissatisfaction-adolescence-constant-adulthood.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.