

Social media fueling eating disorders among female athletes, research shows

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SPRING Forward

Balanced Eating, Exercise,
and Body Image in Sport
for Female Athletes



Kathryn Vidlock, Catherine Liggett,
and Andrew Dole

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Credit: CRC Press

Social media is fueling eating disorders among female athletes who feel they must achieve the "ideal" body, according to experts.

Dr. Kathryn Vidlock and Catherine Liggett, who have both competed in collegiate athletics, and dietician Andrew Dole warn that nutrition "myths" posted by fitness influencers, exercise-related "fitspiration" images on Instagram, and photoshopping are having a direct impact on sportswomen.

Their new book "Spring Forward: Balanced Eating, Exercise, and Body Image in Sport for Female Athletes" highlights how disordered eating and negative body image is now present in nearly all sports, especially in [high school](#), but is often hidden.

Unrealistic goals

The authors say athletes constantly strive to fit into a body-type ideal that isn't realistic and education is the way to "stop this in its tracks."

"False information is often perpetuated on [social media](#) by 'fitness influencers' who are not actually qualified to give [health information](#)," say the authors who are based in the U.S. and New Zealand.

"With the creation of Photoshop and other editing devices, the images portrayed by media are not realistic.

"Many teens cannot achieve this body type without using damaging

restrictive eating. They feel the pressure to look ideal and subsequently they feel they are never good enough when they do not duplicate the unrealistic bodies seen in the media."

Athletes on social media

The considerable pressure to maintain the "perfect" physique has been voiced by top female competitors including tennis champion Serena Williams. Earlier this year, heptathlete Anna Hall used TikTok to attack critics who tell sportswomen they look like men.

In "Spring Forward," published by CRC Press, nearly a dozen [female athletes](#) share stories of how the pressure to be slim triggered their struggles with negative body image.

From swimmers to [tennis players](#), the women featured in the book detail harrowing accounts such as running for 5 miles as self-punishment for eating a cookie, fainting in the gym after 24 hours without food, and dieting heavily after criticism about her "butt cheeks."

One volleyball player even lost a friend—the team's "star player"—to anorexia when the girl suffered a [heart attack](#) triggered by the [eating disorder](#).

Dr. Kathryn Vidlock and her co-authors highlight how the situation is made worse by the fact many sports have specific body type ideals.

Runners are expected to be very thin, they say, yet some [elite runners](#) have muscular legs that appear bigger than the stereotype. The consequence is women often face "disparaging remarks."

What can be done?

To counter [unrealistic expectations](#), "Spring Forward" encourages higher-quality performance in women's sport achieved through healthy eating and nutrition, from secondary school to elite athlete levels.

The aim is to educate teenage and women athletes, sports coaches, and clubs about body confidence.

This will protect them from unhealthy eating and fad diets such as ketogenic and other self-destructive behaviors in a bid to meet unrealistic ideals, say the authors.

It provides extensive instruction manuals on positive eating plans, the consequences of disordered eating such as not menstruating, and how parents can spot warning signs.

The authors have also devised an education program SPRING (Strength and Positivity Rooted in Nutrition for Girls) for high schools which is described in the book.

They are calling for programs like SPRING to be offered in schools, colleges and among adults so women at risk can be identified early.

SPRING focuses on increasing body image "flexibility," which the authors define as the ability to be confident in one's body regardless of size or shape. It involves three, one-hour long sessions spread throughout the athlete's season.

Data from research by the authors suggests SPRING has resulted in an increase of more than 22% in [body image](#) flexibility among cheerleaders in Colorado schools.

More information: Spring Forward: Balanced Eating, Exercise, and Body Image in Sport for Female. www.routledge.com/SPRING-Forwa

[... p/book/9781032385648](#)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

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