

Muscle Madness:

The Ugly Connection Between Body Image And Steroid Abuse

Although body image has long been an issue affecting women and girls, men and boys are becoming insecure about their physical appearance as advertising and other media images display idealized male figures virtually everywhere. Consider these statistics:

- In one study, 95% of college men were dissatisfied with some part of their body.ⁱ
- 46% of men of normal weight think about their appearance "all the time" or "frequently."ⁱⁱ
- 25% of men in America are on a diet on any given day.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 45% of men are dissatisfied with their muscle tone.^{iv}
- 38% of men want bigger pectoral muscles.^v

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In response to these body image anxieties, many men are intensifying their physical activity and some are beginning to succumb to the same body image disorders women have long faced. More than one million males have been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and/or bulimia,^{vi} along with other image-related disorders, including muscle dysmorphia (thinking their muscles are not big enough) and body dysmorphic disorder (dissatisfaction with a body part).^{vii} In 1999, American men spent \$2 billion for gym memberships and another \$2 billion for home exercise equipment.^{viii} Unfortunately, a rising number of men are also turning to anabolic steroids, not just to enhance athletic performance, but also to increase their muscularity. Yet although prolonged steroid abuse is effective in achieving bigger muscles easily, it can have debilitating – and sometimes life-threatening – side effects.

Competition to be the Biggest

Men tend to overestimate the body size women find most attractive.^{ix} After being asked by researchers to choose a body type that they thought women would most prefer, young men singled out those with 30 more pounds of muscle than their own, even though women in the study actually preferred a body type much less muscular.^x In fact, research shows that heterosexual women often prefer partners with less muscle mass than men assume and that the pressure on men to become built has more to do with competition between men than attracting a mate, says researcher Kristen Harrison.^{xi}

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Such intense rivalry to achieve the ideal masculine body may drive men to abuse steroids, especially among those who do not have a capacity to bulk up as quickly as others. Men who are naturally underweight may be particularly at risk, as research has found they have body images that are just as – if not more – negative than overweight women.^{xii} Studies have shown underweight men often rate themselves poorly in comparison to others and have a greater desire to be stronger and more handsome.^{xiii}

They also have a 77% higher likelihood of attempting suicide and are 25% more likely to be seriously depressed than average-weight men.^{xiv} Taking steroids may appear like an easy remedy to their problems, allowing them to escape their physical limitations and achieve the strength and size they seek.

Body Image and Boys

Males are experiencing body image anxiety at increasingly younger ages, as images of body perfection become incessantly pervasive. Even at very young ages, boys are regularly exposed to "ideal" male models in comic books and television cartoons. In fact, one study suggests that a trend

in toy action figures' increasing muscularity is setting unrealistic ideals for boys much in the same way Barbie dolls have been accused of giving an unrealistic ideal for girls.^{xv} When G.I. Joe first appeared in 1964, he had a body most boys could aspire to and achieve. Today's G.I. Joe action figures are so muscular they would be difficult to emulate without the use of steroids, says researcher and psychiatrist Dr. Harrison Pope, Jr.^{xvi} A recent study found more than half of boys ages 11 to 17 chose as their physical ideal an image possible to attain only by using steroids.^{xvii}

As action figures continue to raise the muscle standard to impossible heights, video games are giving boys dangerous solutions, such as steroid use, to their feelings of inadequacy. A popular video game, *Duke Nukem: Total Meltdown*, features an option that allows the main character to use steroids when he becomes tired. The game manual notes, "Steroids give Duke a super adrenaline rush."^{xviii} It does nothing more to educate players about steroids' effects, positive or negative, and can be seen to irresponsibly advocate a potentially harmful substance. Many youth are in fact ignorant of steroids' dangerous effects. An annual survey on drug abuse among high school and college students found that nearly 59% of 12th graders in 2001 felt steroids were harmful.^{xix}

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Highly masculine images continue to follow boys into adolescence and adulthood. Movies turn action heroes like seven-time Mr. Olympia title holder Arnold Schwarzenegger into cultural icons,^{xx} while World Wrestling Federation television shows with a history of steroid abuse and related allegations remain popular among male audiences.^{xxi} Currently, five million households tune into WWF's "Raw is War" every week, making it the highest rated cable television show.^{xxii} The broadcast television version, "WWF Smackdown," attracts an equal number of households.^{xxiii} Even magazines that target men are displaying provocative headlines declaring "Build This Body" with an arrow pointing to a perfectly sculpted male model.^{xxiv} It's no wonder that many men are concerned about their appearance, as media promotes ideal bodies modeled by exceptional examples, who set standards few men, if any, can attain without surgery or steroids.

Steroid Abuse Among Youth

Researchers are finding an alarming increase in the use of anabolic steroids among the young, many of whom may not understand the dangers nor care about steroids' undesirable effects until it is too late.^{xxv} Close to three percent (2.8%) of 8th graders, 3.5% of 10th graders and 3.7% of 12th graders reported taking anabolic steroids at least once during their lives during the 2001 school year.^{xxvi} A 1998 study of middle school students found similar rates of usage during the 1995 and 1996 school year.^{xxvii}

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- baldness
- infertility

Anabolic steroids may deliver lean muscle mass, strength and stamina, but they bring a number of less desirable side-effects, including jaundice, fluid retention, high blood pressure, increased risk for cancer, acne and the risk of HIV or hepatitis if steroids are injected.^{xxviii} There are also gender specific symptoms of steroid abuse. Males may suffer from shrunken testicles, infertility, baldness and development of breasts (gynecomastia), while females may experience male-pattern baldness, changes in or cessation of the menstrual cycle, deepened voice, growth of facial hair and

enlargement of the clitoris.^{xxix} Of particular concern for children who take steroids is premature skeletal maturation and accelerated puberty changes, which can permanently stunt their growth.^{xxx} Other side effects also remain permanent, forcing them to live with the consequences of steroid abuse for the rest of their lives.

Although the rise in steroid use can be mainly attributed to boys, a small yet rising number of females is beginning to abuse steroids; in a 1997 study, 175,000 teenage girls reported using

anabolic steroids at least once, a 100% increase since 1991.^{xxxi} The 1998 middle school study also found that rates of usage among younger students were surprisingly similar for each gender.^{xxxii} Some researchers attribute the increase in steroid use among girls to changes in fashion, noting that the former preoccupation with thinness has turned toward the desire for a lean but muscular body.^{xxxiii} Female athletes – especially body-builders – are particularly at risk for anabolic steroid use and body image disorders. In a recent study of females who spent five days a week or more in the gym lifting weights, 33% reported current or past steroid use,^{xxxiv} while a survey of middle school students found females who weight trained had the highest percentage of steroid users.^{xxxv} Another study also found that predictors for disordered eating behavior and steroid abuse among young women were similar, and the researchers recommended addressing anabolic steroid use in programs designed to prevent eating disorders.^{xxxvi} However, use among male high school seniors and young adults continues to be three to five times higher than among same-aged females.^{xxxvii}

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ⁱ Pope, H.G., Phillips, K.A., Oliverdia, R. (2000). *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession*. The Free Press: New York, New York.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Glenn, J. Male body image concerns gain recognition among health professionals. Michigan Daily, October 12, 2000.

^{iv} Pope, H.G., Phillips, K.A., Oliverdia, R., op. cit.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Glenn, J., op. cit.

^{vii} Meltz, B.F. Boys and body image. *Boston Globe*, June 1, 2000.

^{viii} Pope, H.G., Phillips, K.A., Oliverdia, R., op. cit.

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^{xiii} Ibid.

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^{xvi} Meltz, B.F., op. cit.

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^{xviii} Ibid.

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^{xx} schwarzenegger.com, the official Arnold Schwarzenegger web site.

[Online: <http://www.schwarzenegger.com>. Last retrieved December 8, 2000.]

^{xxi} Pope, H.G., Phillips, K.A., Oliverdia, R., op. cit.

^{xxii} Fact Sheet: TV Professional Wrestling and Children. National Institute on Media and the Family.

[Online: <http://www.mediaandthefamily.org/research/fact/wrestling.shtml>. Last retrieved December 8, 2000.]

^{xxiii} Fact Sheet: TV Professional Wrestling and Children. National Institute on Media and the Family.

[Online: <http://www.mediaandthefamily.org/research/fact/wrestling.shtml>. Last retrieved December 8, 2000.]

^{xxiv} *Men's Health Magazine*, December 2000.

^{xxv} Shallek-Klein, J. "Striving for the *Baywatch* Boy Build." Silver Chips Newspaper, October 7, 1999.

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