

## RM 5–MH: Common Questions about Body Image

Common questions students raise in the classroom on the topic of body image include the following:

- How do I know what is a healthy weight for me?
- What diet really works?
- What causes eating disorders?
- How can I help my friend who might have an eating disorder?

The following information may be useful to educators if they are faced with similar questions in their classrooms. This information is based on a “do no harm” approach, which is considered best practice for eating disorder prevention.

### How do I know what is a healthy weight for me?

There are different charts and formulas that are said to determine healthy weight. In reality, healthy weight is determined best by a person’s lifestyle rather than by a number on a scale or a chart. We all have a natural body shape and weight that is determined by our genetics and is different for everyone. We are meant to have different amounts of muscle, bone, and fat, which make up our body’s composition and influence our weight. The healthiest body weight is what the body sets for itself when a person’s lifestyle includes balanced, healthy food choices and regular physical activity.

Regardless of our weight or shape, every body needs nutritious food and daily physical movement to be strong and healthy. If this is a lifestyle that you practise, then rest assured your body is at the right weight for you.

### What diet really works?

The issue of dieting is a confusing one because the media, in the attempt to sell ideas and products, bombard the public with dieting information. The first thing to know is that diets can be dangerous, particularly for young people, because the growth of bones, organs, and the brain are dependent on the nutrition put into the body. Diets that restrict food intake below what the body needs can actually affect internal growth and the efficiency of one’s metabolism (the rate at which the body burns energy). This doesn’t mean the body needs a lot of fast food or treats to be healthy. What it does mean is the best diet (or eating plan) for young bodies includes balance, variety, and moderation, and should not include skipping meals, restricting food, or omitting any food groups.

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## RM 5–MH: Common Questions about Body Image *(Continued)*

If you are concerned that your body weight is not healthy for you, talk to your doctor and your parents about how you feel. Many teens are perfectly healthy but are uncomfortable with the natural body changes that occur during puberty. Your doctor can refer you to a dietician if he or she thinks this is really necessary. If you want to change anything about your diet and explore the healthiest eating plan for you, take a look at your pattern of eating. Are you eating nutritious meals and snacks that include all the food groups? If not, you might want to address your lifestyle or eating behaviours. If your eating pattern includes skipping meals, getting overly hungry, and choosing foods in a hurry that are low in nutrients (high in saturated fat and/or sugar), you would want to make healthier choices about your diet, *not go on a diet*.

If you are convinced that you need to diet, ask yourself instead, “Am I physically active on a daily basis?” If not, you might consider how you can incorporate a regular schedule of exercise into your lifestyle.

What causes eating disorders?

There is no single reason why a young person develops an eating disorder, just as there is no one person who is protected from developing an eating disorder. We hear mostly of young women developing eating disorders, but in reality, girls, boys, men, and women of all ethnicities and backgrounds can have eating problems and body image issues. Researchers have shown that dieting behaviour puts an individual at greater risk for developing an eating disorder because, combined with other factors, it can set up a pattern where an individual is not listening to the body’s internal cues for hunger and satiety.

Usually a person’s relationship with food and his or her body gets out of control (restricting food, over-exercising, and/or binge eating) because he or she has underlying feelings (such as anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loss, or fear) that need to be explored. Sometimes life stresses or traumatic events can also cause uncomfortable feelings that a young person does not know how to deal with. Regardless of the underlying reasons, disordered eating and eating disorders are serious problems that should not be ignored or minimized.

It is important that you tell a trusted adult (your parent or guardian, school counsellor, doctor) if you think you might have an eating problem. If the person you tell does not take you seriously, tell someone else. There are health professionals who specialize in disordered eating and body image issues. They can help individuals work through the underlying reasons for why this problem has developed so that the individuals are not at risk for long-term physical, mental, and emotional health consequences.

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## **RM 5–MH: Common Questions about Body Image *(Continued)***

How can I help my friend who might have an eating disorder?

If you think your friend has eating problems or concerns about body image, talk to your friend.

- Show your friend that you are concerned and care about her or him.
- Let your friend know that sometimes people under-eat or overeat or try to control their body size because they are unhappy or stressed about something and you want to know more about how he or she is feeling.
- Remind your friend that because you care and ultimately want her or him to be healthy and happy, you want to be supportive but are worried about what your friend is doing to herself or himself.
- Encourage your friend to tell a trusted adult about the problems, or tell one yourself if you don't see your friend getting the necessary help. It might seem as though you are not being a good friend if you tell, but the truth is that getting help with body image concerns or eating problems when they first begin is the best way to help your friend avoid dangerous health problems in the future. Even if this temporarily puts a strain on your relationship, you are still doing the right thing.
- Be a good role model. This means not making negative comments about food or about your own body or others' bodies. Remind yourself and your friend that there is no such thing as being perfect or "having it all together." Compliment each other for the character traits that are unrelated to appearance.