

Muscles and Male Body Image

Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are abnormal dietary habits. Its causes are unknown. Eating disorders are typically characterized as a feminine issue due to the associated concerns with weight and appearance, leading to the problem being ignored in male patients. Regardless of gender identity, disordered eating is often caused by negative body image. For men, these issues are typically rooted in concepts of traditional masculinity and strength. Jason Lavender's work in *Current Psychiatry Reports* suggests that eating disorders affect 1 in 4 men and that disordered eating develops more rapidly in male populations than female.

In male populations, these disorders are often associated with an emphasis on an idealized male physique, leading to muscularity-oriented disordered eating. Muscle dysmorphia causes affected boys and men to view their muscles as smaller than they are in reality and therefore undesirable. Issues of male body dysmorphia are sometimes traced to childhood weight issues, bullying, or the influence of muscle-bound idols in the media. Over roughly thirty years, media content has increased focus on masculinity and musculature. Male models in magazines undergo unhealthy muscle gain and fat loss, combined with photography tricks to demonstrate the "ideal" male body. Body dissatisfaction has increased due to media obsession with unrealistic yet idolized body fantasies, exemplified in figures such as Captain America, and G.I. Joe toys.

These unrealistic standards affect men's body image and sense of self-worth. Their perceived physical weakness causes further insecurities as their appearance seems to refute their masculinity. Muscles provide visual proof of traditional masculinity. This masculinity dictates that a lack of strength is both unattractive and a personal failure. Thinness in men is often associated with illness and femininity, both negative traits in traditional masculine paradigms. This combined perception of unattractiveness, weakness, and effeminacy create a negative self-image and motivation to "fix" the physical issue. This fix is often disordered eating combined with unhealthy exercise habits. The disordered eating typically manifests in a protein heavy diet that eliminates necessary carbohydrates and fats, sometimes combined with equally problematic bingeing episodes. The exercise focuses on slimming and muscle gain, combining with the eating habits to form a well-sculpted, bulky yet trim physique. While this goal is incredibly unrealistic, the ramifications are very real, as these eating disorders and habits affect the physical health and happiness of roughly ten million men in the U.S.

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Information gathered from: American Psychological Association (www.apa.org); Anna Paterson's *Fit to Die: Men and Eating Disorders* (SAGE, 2004); Eric Strother, Raymond Lemberg, Stevie Chariese Stanford, and Dayton Turberville's "Eating Disorders in Men: Underdiagnosed, Undertreated, and Misunderstood" in *Eating Disorders*, October 01, 2012; Jason Lavender, Tiffany Brown, and Stuart Murray's, "Men, Muscles, and Eating Disorders: An Overview of Traditional and Muscularity-Oriented Disordered Eating" in *Current Psychiatry Reports*, May 03, 2017; E. Manzato and Renata Strumia's *Eating Disorders in Males Muscularity and Fragility: The Two-Faced Janus of Male Identity* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2011); and National Eating Disorders Association (nationaleatingdisorders.org).