

BIGOREXIA: THE OBSESSION WITH GETTING SUPERHERO-SIZE BUFF

We tend to associate body dysmorphia and eating disorders with girls and young women. But recently, a new body-image issue has emerged that affects boys and young men almost exclusively. Coined bigorexia, it's a form of muscle dysmorphia that is characterised by a preoccupation and dissatisfaction with one's muscle mass, leading to a fixation with lifting weights, and following a diet that lowers weight and builds muscle mass.

According to Jason Nagata, MD, a paediatrician specialising in adolescent medicine at the University of California in San Francisco, while the pandemic and social media presented the perfect storm for both eating disorders and body-image issues in teens, it's been under-recognised in boys. "Both [the pandemic and social media] are directly connected to an increase in muscle dysmorphia," he says in an article for E Medicine Health.

The role of social media

While young men wanting to bulk up used to look up to celebrities such as action-film stars and famous bodybuilders, today inspiration can be found and directly accessed through social media.

"An everyday teen can become a celebrity," Nagata says. "Then, thanks to social media algorithms, if a teenage boy likes or interacts with a post that features a muscular guy or is all about fitness, they'll start getting all sorts of related content. They'll get bombarded with tons of ads for protein shakes, for example, as well as bodybuilding equipment, and that will further distort reality."

Boys' insecurities are being exploited

In the same way that females who struggle with eating disorders are vulnerable to spending money on diet pills and other weight-loss products, boys and young men affected by bigorexia are a soft target for companies trying to market gym equipment or products that build muscle mass.

They're also prone to being influenced by retouched images that exaggerate the before-and-after results of some of these products.



“A guy will post his worst picture out of a thousand for his before shot, and then post the best photo out of a thousand,” Nagata says. “This, in itself, can really confuse a teenager, because the story of this person’s changed body looks so realistic.”

Veya Seekis is a lecturer at the School of Applied Psychology at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. She has been collecting data on the social-media usage and habits of 303 undergraduate men and 198 high-school boys in Australia. Her results indicate that when young men were exposed to pictures of the archetypal masculine physique regularly, they experienced increased incidences of low body esteem and the desire to build muscle.

While the desire to be fit and muscled can be common among teenage boys, what is startling is how young some of the boys are when they start working out and eating for bigger muscles – some are as young as 10.

Beware of the buff

If you notice that your child is exhibiting signs of body or muscle dysmorphia – constantly talking about diet and exercise, displaying a change in social or academic habits, or checking themselves in the mirror at regular intervals – it may be time to discuss the issue.

“Pay attention if he is withdrawing from friends and family because of his concerns about his appearance,” Nagata says. “For example, we often hear that a teenager will no longer eat family meals or at a restaurant, because the protein content isn’t high enough or the food is too fatty.”

If you or your loved one needs support during this time, reach out to your ICAS EHWP via your toll-free number or the ICAS On-the-Go App to seek counselling support.

Toll-free:
(from land and mobile phones)

Or request a call back: ***134*905#**

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References:

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