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Body size (dis)satisfaction in Irish teenagers

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Concern and dissatisfaction with body weight is well recognised in adolescence, in particular for adolescent girls⁽¹⁾. It has been reported that many normal-weight adolescents consider themselves to be overweight, and it is believed that self-perception of body size may be more important in predicting behaviour than actual body size^(1,2). Excessive, or misplaced, weight-related concerns may have a negative impact on weight control, and result in unhealthy weight-control behaviours. The present report presents data on the level of body-weight dissatisfaction in Irish teenagers and the relationship between dissatisfaction and actual body size.

Data were collected (*n* 441) on body-size satisfaction via questionnaire, as part of the Irish National Teens' Food Survey (conducted in 2005–6). Teenagers were asked if they were satisfied with their current weight.

Overall, more than half the sample reported that they were dissatisfied with their body weight, with 41% (*n* 179) reporting that they would prefer to be lighter and 12% (*n* 54) reporting that they would prefer to be heavier. Of girls 64% (*n* 136) compared with 43% (*n* 97) of boys expressed dissatisfaction with their weight, with 60% (*n* 128) of girls indicating that they would like to be lighter and only 4% (*n* 8) of girls compared with 21% (*n* 46) of boys indicating that they would like to be heavier.

Results were then analysed by BMI category. Of boys 62% (*n* 112) compared with 41% (*n* 73) of girls with a BMI in the normal range reported that they satisfied with their current weight. Of girls 54% (*n* 96) compared with 13% (*n* 24) of boys with a BMI in the normal range reported that they would like to be lighter. Of the overweight teenagers 38% (*n* 9) of overweight boys compared with 83% (*n* 19) of overweight girls indicated that they would like to be lighter, while over half (54%, *n* 13) of overweight teenage boys said they would like to stay the same weight. There were no gender differences in body-size satisfaction in obese teens, with thirty of the thirty-three obese teens indicating that they would like to weigh less.

Results show a high level of dissatisfaction with body weight in normal-weight and overweight teenage girls, but this outcome was not true for teenage boys. Gender differences in body-size perceptions and satisfaction in Irish teenagers should be considered when formulating advice and strategies for weight control and healthy eating for teenagers.

1. Neumark-Sztainer D, Story M, Hannan PJ, Perry CL & Irving LM (2002) *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* **156**, 171–178.

2. Barker M, Robinson S, Wilman C & Barker DJP (2000) *Appetite* **35**, 161–170.