



NUTRITION

Body Image

by Nancy Clark – Author of *Sports Nutrition Guidebook*

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who’s the fastest of them all?”

Ask any runner that question, and the answer will undoubtedly be the fastest runner is the *thinnest* runner. But that may not be true. Very often, the thinnest runner is poorly fueled, obsessed with food, and sooner or later, gets sidelined with overuse injuries due to excessive exercise.

Unfortunately, too many runners believe “If only I could lose just a few pounds, I’d be so much faster...” The sad part is many of these same runners do not have five pounds to lose. They are already very lean. Their problem is not a “fat” or out-of-shape body, but rather a distorted body image. They fail to acknowledge that people, like dogs, come in different sizes and shapes that are genetically predetermined. That powerful St. Bernard holds no shame for looking “fatter” than a Greyhound!

Bumps and Bulges

Although runners tend to be leaner than the average American, the reality is, few runners naturally possess their desired physique. Most runners are ordinary mortals, burdened with bumps and bulges. A misguided effort to eliminate those bumps and bulges tends to hurt performance, rather than convert the athlete into a faster runner.

A survey of 24 food-and-weight-obsessed competitive female athletes (primarily runners, triathletes, cyclists and swimmers, ages 18 to 36) suggests they had a greater *drive for thinness* and *more body dissatisfaction* than the comparison group of athletes who were at peace with food and weight. The food/weight obsessed group had 2%

more body fat than the comparison group, and this insignificant difference took a draining psychological toll:

- 63% reported moderate to extreme body weight dissatisfaction.
- 71% reported being pre-occupied with weight.
- 75% often or always “felt fat.”
- 83% reported a fear of getting fat or fatter.¹

That represents a lot of mental energy consumed with food and weight.

As a sports dietitian, I commonly hear complaints about “feeling fat”, “thinking too much about food and weight”, and fear of being “unable to stop eating” once the runner starts eating. (That is, eating one cookie and then devouring the whole plate of cookies.) If this sounds familiar, your quest for a lower body weight comes with a high price tag. There’s a possibility you can improve your relationship with your body, fuel your body appropriately and healthfully, and as a result, run faster and set PRs.

Are You Imagining the Wrong Body?

If you are a female runner who has large thighs (like all the women in your family), or if you are a male runner who hates your “love handles” (that all the men in the family also have), you need to be realistic in your expectations. You can trim some of the fat on your thighs or around your waist by creating a calorie deficit, but you are unlikely to eliminate these “flaws” altogether. Instead of obsessing about your imperfections, I recommend you let go of your dissatisfaction with your body, accept yourself for the sincere and caring person

you are, and focus on the things in life that really matter (health, relationships). You can waste a lot of mental energy fretting about body fatness.

As I mentioned before, we come in sizes and shapes unique to our genetic makeup. Just as some of us have thick hair, others have thin hair. Some of us have blue eyes, and others have brown eyes. No one seems to care about hair thickness or eye color, but the media has done a very good job of making us all care about body fatness and physical appearance. Few people realize that even models have bumps and bulges and imperfections. (To see photos of models before and after getting airbrushed and enhanced, visit www.edreferral.com/body_image.htm. Enlightening!)

As a result of media’s messages and misguided peer pressure, too many normal weight runners feel self-conscious about their perfectly fine bodies. Some end up feeling inadequate and depressed because of repeated failures to transform themselves into a shape they want to be, yet are not meant to be. Get a grip; there is a happier way to live!

In general, about one-third of all Americans are truly dissatisfied with their appearance, women more than men:

- A woman will most commonly complain about her thighs, abdomen, breasts, and buttocks.
- A man expresses dissatisfaction with his abdomen, upper body, and balding scalp.

Sometimes the problem is imaginary (such as the runner with anorexia who complains about her fat thighs). Sometimes the problem is real and ranges from a mild complaint about love handles that hang over the running shorts to a major preoccupation with thunder thighs, resulting in relentless dieting and exercise. The runners who struggle most with body image — including baby boomers fighting middle-age spread, as well as teenage girls experiencing body changes at puberty — are the ones most likely to develop an eating disorder.

Learning to Love Your Body

So what should you do if you are dissatisfied with your body? You might think the solution is to lose weight by cutting calories, running extra miles, or doing thousands of sit-ups. Yes, these efforts will enhance your fitness level, but they may not result in fat loss. If you have no excess body fat to lose, Nature will give you a hard time! Often attempts to lose weight by exercising relentlessly and restricting food end up in food binges, disordered eating, and weight gain.

As I mentioned before, so much of what you look like (your height, musculature, and to a certain extent your weight) is under genetic influence. You can slightly redesign the house that Nature gave you, but you can't totally remodel it. (To reiterate, a St. Bernard will never look like a Greyhound.) The alternative to an endless struggle to change your body is to find peace with your body. Instead of trying to change yourself on the outside, try changing yourself on the inside. Here are a few steps to get you going in the right direction:

- Revise your self-talk (that is, refer to yourself as a *gorgeous goddess* or *handsome hulk* instead of a *fat failure*).
- Identify the parts of your body that you like.
- Give yourself credit for your attractive body parts with positive talk.

Stop dwelling on the negative, and start appreciating all the good things your body does for you. It runs for miles, lifts weights at the gym, gets you through a busy day, and lets you have fun. Each day, you can work towards improving your relationship with your body:

- Close your eyes and envision your body as being "good enough" the way it is.
- Visualize yourself with confident posture and body language.
- Open your eyes and assume those characteristics.

With practice, you'll come to feel more confident in your body. Why, the day will come when even *you* are feeling at peace while wearing those skimpy running shorts!

A Good Weight

True, some runners do carry excess body fat that hinders their running times. (Try lugging around a five-pound bag

Making Peace with Your Body

If you find yourself obsessing about the look of your body, give yourself permission to live your life in a healthier way. Here's a *Declaration of Independence from Weight Obsessions*, taken from EDAP, the Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention Program.

- I will accept my body in its natural size and shape.
- I will celebrate all that my body can do for me each day.
- I will treat my body with respect, give it enough rest, fuel it with a variety of foods, exercise it moderately, and listen to what it needs.
- I will choose to resist our society's pressures to judge myself and other people on physical characteristics like body weight, shape, or size. I will respect people based on their depth of character and the impact of their accomplishments.
- I will refuse to deny my body of valuable nutrients by dieting or using weight loss products.
- I will avoid categorizing foods as either "good" or "bad." I will not associate guilt or shame with eating certain foods. Instead, I will nourish my body with a balance of foods, listening and responding to what it needs.
- I will not use food to mask my emotional needs.
- I will not avoid participating in activities that I enjoy (e.g., swimming, running, enjoying a meal) simply because I am self-conscious about the way my body looks. I will recognize that I have the right to enjoy any activities regardless of my body shape or size.
- I will believe that my self-esteem and identity come from within!

Courtesy of the National Eating Disorders Association. www.NationalEatingDisorders.org
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of flour and see how quickly that can slow you down!) This article is not about how to lose that excess flab. It's about how to feel good about your body, whether or not you have fat to lose.

How do you know if you are at a good running weight? Some runners believe it's when Mom says you look like you have been living in a concentration camp! Not the case. The cost of attaining and maintaining that semi-starved weight is poorly fueled muscles, sub-optimal performance, and risk of injury. Better ways to determine a good weight are:

- Get your body fat measured so you have some unbiased data. To find a local sports dietician who measures your body fat and gives you tips on how to attain or maintain a good running weight, use the referral network at www.SCANDpg.org.
- Pay attention to random comments about your body. That is, do teammates look at you quizzically when you talk about how fat you are? Are your co-workers asking if your health is ok? Are your relatives remarking you look too thin? Save all these comments on an imaginary shelf and compare the abundance of *you're too thin* comments with *you could stand to lose some weight* comments. There's a possibility people are telling the truth when they say you look too thin.

Above all, you want to pay attention to your running and performance. At what

weight can you run energetically, eat normally, and not obsess about food? That's likely the best weight for your body.

Peace and Serenity

Your body is your house; it's where you live. You have the right to feel comfortable living in your house, regardless of your body's size and shape. Appreciate your body for what it is instead of punishing yourself for what it is not. If your self-described fat thighs or menopot seem imperfect, think about who even *cares* what your body looks like and focus more on eating wisely and fueling your muscles to perform well. Trust that appropriate fueling will lead to an appropriate weight. A sports dietitian can help guide that journey to both improve your running performance and find peace with your body.

Here's to miles of smiles!

Nancy Clark, MS, RD, CSSD, (Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics) counsels runners and other athletes at her private practice in Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill, MA (617-383-6100). Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook (2008) and her Food Guide for Marathoners: Tips for Everyday Champions (2008) both include a strong section on weight management and dieting gone awry. See www.nancyclarkrd.com for more information.

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