

Exercise as Weight-Control

The importance of physical activity for general health has been well-established. Research has shown the positive effect of exercise on the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, and on overall mortality. The growing emphasis on physical activity and exercise in light of this research is sensible and praise-worthy.

However, for many people, the health rationale is far from what drives their physical activity. The messages about exercising and the meaning of exercise seems to be different for men and women. For many women, the motivation for exercising is tied to achieving a sleek and curveless body shape, rather than attaining cardiovascular or other health benefits.

According to a survey in *Glamour* magazine published in the mid-1980's, 95% of the 33,000 women who completed the survey reported having used exercise explicitly for weight control. Another survey, this time published in *Runner's World* magazine, found that around 50% of women runners reported that they were often, usually, or always "terrified of being fat."

For many women, their motivation for exercising is in order to alter their body weight and shape.

This contrasts with men's motivation for exercising, which they report as more often being for fitness, or for competence. For most men, fitness occurs within the context of sports and team activities, whereas for most women exercise is pursued through solitary "workout" programmes or "fitness" classes.

For many women, fitness has become a repeat of the theme of beautifying the body by making it thinner.

For women with eating disorders, exercise comes to be seen as a way of using up additional energy, in order to lose weight. Often individuals with eating disorders allow themselves to eat, provided there is strenuous exercise to "counteract" the effects of eating, or to burn off the additional calories. Because of this, exercise is calculated as "calories burned," in the same way as food is calculated as "calories taken in."

Because of this emphasis on weight loss as the goal for exercising, rather than for good health, many women with eating disorders will exercise even when starved or semi-starved. This puts extreme demands on one's body, and often results in injuries to joints, muscle tissue and bones.

The energy needed for performing the exercise ought to come from food. However, in semi-starved women the body will redirect energy from other vital functions to provide energy for exercise.

For example, body temperature may be decreased, and so a person feels colder after exercise than before, or energy for brain function may be used up, so concentration is lost and mood drops after exercise.

If the body runs out of fuel during exercise it may break down body muscle and use this as energy. This will result in weakening and damage to muscles and organs, including the heart. Therefore, if we want to exercise and look after our bodies we need to balance our activity levels with our food intake, to prevent damaging our health.