

Body image concerns more men than women

Level 2 • Intermediate

Body image concerns more men than women, research finds

Denis Campbell

- 1 Recent research has shown that men worry more about their body shape and appearance – beer bellies, “man boobs” or going bald – than women worry about how they look. More than four in five men (80.7%) talk about their bodies’ imperfections, compared with 75% of women. Similarly, 38% of men would give up at least a year of their life in exchange for a perfect body – again, a higher percentage than women.
- 2 “These results tell us that men are concerned about body image, just like women. We knew that ‘body talk’ affected women and young people, and now we know that it affects men too,” said Dr Phillippa Diedrichs, from the Centre of Appearance Research at the University of the West of England, which conducted the study of 394 British men.
- 3 The survey revealed that men have high levels of anxiety about their bodies. Some use compulsive exercise, strict diets, laxatives and make themselves sick to try to lose weight.
- 4 80.7% talked about their own or others’ appearance, e.g. weight, lack of hair or a slim body. 30% have heard someone refer to their “beer belly”, 19% have been described as “chubby” and 19% have heard people talking about their “moobs (man boobs)”. 23% said concerns about their appearance had stopped them from going to the gym. 63% thought their arms or chests were not muscular enough. 29% thought about their appearance at least five times a day. 18% were on a high-protein diet to increase their muscles, and 16% were on a diet to slim down.
- 5 A spokesperson for the organization that promoted the research said: “Historically, making conversation about your body is believed to be something only women do. But it is clear from this research that men are also guilty of commenting on one another’s bodies, and in many cases this is having a damaging effect.” Men’s high levels of body talk show that there is a growing obsession with appearance, she added.
- 6 Almost three in five men (58.6%) said body talk affected them, usually negatively. 12% said they would give up a year of life if they could have their ideal body weight and shape, 15.2% would give up two to five years, 5.3% would give up six to ten years and 5.3% would sacrifice ten years or more.
- 7 About 4% said they had made themselves sick to control their weight, while 3.4% said they used laxatives for the same purpose. Almost a third (31.9%) had “exercised in a compulsive way” to lose weight, although that might be partly because 52% of the respondents were gym members, when the average is 12%.
- 8 Respondents, of whom about a quarter were gay men, said the media and celebrities gave a false picture of physical perfection. “Girls want to be slim and males want to be big and lean, and while it isn’t a bad thing for people to want to look better, it has become more like a competition, which has a bad effect on most people’s mental health”, said one respondent.
- 9 Alan White, a professor of Men’s Health at Leeds Metropolitan University, said: “These results are worrying but not surprising. There’s been a big increase in the numbers of British men having cosmetic procedures such as a nose job or removal of breast tissue; that’s gone from almost nothing to quite a significant industry over the last ten years. All this encourages a quick fix rather than appropriate diet and physical fitness levels.”

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