Lifewire: Growing incidence of eating disorders cause for alarm

by Ven Griva

Because clothes hang well and look better on tall models with lean figures, the trend toward employing such women in advertising is probably here to stay.

However, many psychologists suspect they are seeing more and more young girls with eating disorders as a result of this trend. What's more alarming for mental health experts is the fact that girls with eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa have gotten younger in recent years.

Glamorizing thin teen girls wearing makeup and posing suggestively in advertisements promotes unhealthy bodies and unhealthy attitudes, especially for girls in the pre- and early-teen years, says Dr. Stephanie Setliff, a University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center psychologist.

"The age of diagnosis for several types of eating disorders has gotten younger, as I'm now treating girls ages 7 to 9, versus 13 to 14 years old," she said.

Mental health experts such as Setliff say body type and heredity should be taken into account when promoting women and girls clothing and style. Otherwise, the effect can be life-threatening.

TOO THIN

The recent death of an ultra-thin Brazilian model has aroused worldwide reaction. Ana Carolina Reston, who modeled in China, Turkey, Mexico and Japan, died Nov. 14 at a hospital in Sao Paulo. The 5-foot-8 model weighed 88 pounds at the time of her death.

That computes to a body mass index of 13.4, according to the body mass index, or BMI, calculator found at the National Institute of Health's Web site (www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/).

Fashion shows in Europe and South America have been canceled in the aftermath or Reston's death.

In fact, Italy's Youth Policy and Sports Minister Giovanna Melandri has hammered out an agreement with some of her country's fashion houses to exclude size zeroes from the catwalk during Milan's fashion week in February.

The agreement seeks to recognize the World Health Organization's BMI of 18.5 to define underweight. Models with BMIs below that threshold, such as Reston's, might be banned from future fashion shows.

WARNING SIGNS

Setliff warns parents to be on the lookout for any signs that their child might be developing an eating disorder. Signs include:

- Obsession with food and/or exercise.

- Wearing clothing that disguises the body.

- Spending less time with friends and formerly pleasant pastimes.

- Frequent trips to the bathroom, especially after meals.

- Dieting and changes in sleep patterns.

SKELETAL HEALTH

Think of osteoporosis and frail, elderly women generally come to mind. But men are not immune to the condition, says Dr. Khashayar Sakhaee, chief of mineral metabolism at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

It is a fact that of the 10 million Americans estimated to have the condition, 80 percent are women. The danger is that osteoporosis is more likely to go undiagnosed in men.

Osteoporosis is characterized by a decrease in bone mass and density and the enlargement of the spaces that occur naturally inside our bones. People with osteoporosis are known to suffer more bone fractures more easily when they fall or are physically stressed in weight-bearing situations.

The condition becomes critical in people over the age of 50. As we age, our bodies lose some ability to metabolize calcium and turn it into bone.

Sakhaee suggests these steps to counteract the aging process:

- Stop smoking tobacco.

- Consume alcohol only moderately.

- Exercise regularly.

"Adequate calcium intake also is essential," Sakhaee said.

In general, men aged 30 to 50 should take 1,000 milligrams of calcium daily and they should increase their intake to 1,200 milligrams daily after they turn 50.

Sakhaee says that vitamin D is also important for bone health. In men 50 to 70 years old, 400 to 800 immunizing units, or IU, are recommended. The amount of vitamin D should increase to 1,000 after age 70.

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