



Measuring up to GI Joe

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SmartShape.com.au, written in 2000

What's the problem with male body image?

If Mattel's Barbie doll were human, standing 170 cm tall, she'd have a waist measurement of around 41 cm (19 inches). That's the real-life bicep equivalent of today's male action figure toys.

While the probability of finding a real woman with a Barbie figure has been calculated at less than 1 in 100,000, the odds of any man shaping up to GI Joe Extreme, Iron Man or Batman are non-existent. These figures are bigger than the biggest professional wrestlers and body builders.

The researchers who took the tape measure to the children's toys noticed that the male dolls have grown over the past few decades. For example, early GI Joes had no visible abdominal muscles, the 1975 version displays a little definition, but the 1994 figure has abdominals that are ripped, shredded and rock hard. And the 1998 GI Joe Extreme has a huge chest, shoulders and arm muscles that dwarfs its predecessors.

Does this mean that cultural ideals of male body image have changed and that men are now expected to be bigger and more muscular? If so, what role does the fitness industry play in causing and curing body image problems that might now be affecting a growing number of men?

Bulking up but feeling down

In their book, *The Adonis Complex* released earlier this year, three American psychologists provide long-overdue insight into male body image.

First, they acknowledge that men with body image concerns share some characteristics with women who suffer from anorexia nervosa. Feelings of being too fat, dislike of their bodies and shame about body image are common to both sexes with dieting disorders.

But then there are emotions and rituals unique to the male condition labelled reverse anorexia, bigorexia nervosa or megarexia. Unlike anorexia, where minimisation of the body is desirable, sufferers of bigorexia feel they are smaller or less muscular than they actually are and have to increase their size to feel comfortable. The condition is also known as muscle dysmorphia or perceived puniness.

Like anorexia nervosa, there is no single cause. Contributing factors are likely to include a genetic or biologically-based component – you can be born with a predisposition towards obsessive or compulsive behaviour. But this may only load the gun. The trigger must be pulled by something else and this is likely to be a psychological or environmental component. Being teased when young or driven to over-achieve may push men closer to obsessive behaviours. Living in a society where the ideal body is best and nothing else compares can also be toxic for the development of megarexia. Readers of *The Adonis Complex* are able to distil a list of behaviours that describe the muscle dysmorphic male. These include:

- The need to work out every day
- Anger or unrest if a workout is missed
- Compulsive exercise despite pain and injuries
- Ultra-low-fat, high-protein diets despite considerable hunger
- Constant counting of grams of protein consumed
- Force feeding of protein drinks
- Inability to eat out at restaurants, due to the food's fat content
- Regular binges on forbidden high-fat foods
- Consumption of a cocktail of dietary supplements
- Habitual steroid taking
- Workouts taking priority over social events and intimate relationships

The authors repeatedly stress that we shouldn't expect males to talk openly about these feelings and behaviours. Men are being increasingly bombarded with supermale images in magazines, in movies and on the labels of protein powders, but they can't articulate their desperation. And for every boy or man with a full-scale body image disorder, there are many more with milder cases of the same body obsessions not disabling in any way, but still enough to hurt.

A case study of mild megarexia

It took ten years for me to realise I suffered from megarexia. It hit me when I was being interviewed on the topic of male body image for a national current affairs program. When asked how much I used to work out, I replied that I was a recovered megarexic. I quickly qualified that I had never considered taking steroids nor competed in any body building competitions. However, at one stage I was going to the gym twice a day, every day. I took copious amounts of protein powders, amino acid pills and sessions in the sauna. At the time it seemed normal. The muscle magazines told me it was normal. So did the hard-core guys at the gym. I guess we were all anxious about how we looked.

Megarexia didn't harm me physically, but it did ingrain the notion that resistance training was the only rewarding exercise. Now at 30, being happy to talk about my experiences I can enjoy cardiovascular exercise, without feeling I should be lifting. Weights once a week is now fine for me, and I'm fitter and healthier than ever.

Bringing megarexia down to size

Psychologist and body image expert, Denise Greenaway (www.mirrormirror.com.au) warns, "When people exercise just to burn calories or gain muscle they are not building a successful partnership. You should aim to make the mind and body equal partners, rather than letting one dominate the other. This is the key to life-long body-friendly fitness."

There are a number of steps fitness enthusiasts can take to minimise the chances of triggering megarexic tendencies. The result can be a new level of body satisfaction where becoming fit and healthy is natural and enjoyable.

- Ditch the beefcake and babe posters for inspirational quotes or pictures of real people.
- If you must read fashion or muscle magazines, place a sticker on the cover that says, "Don't take the photos in this magazine seriously. All bodies are good bodies. Yours is too."
- Don't spend all your gym time in front of the mirrors. Sure, mirrors are important for checking good exercise form, but some people's self esteem may be damaged by constant reflections of themselves.
- Wear loose comfortable clothing. Tight clothing that shows off bumps and lumps can have a negative affect too.
- Don't get body fat measured too often. Body fat levels take time to change and an inaccurate high score can reduce motivation to continue with an exercise program. Energy levels and feelings of wellbeing are more positive measurements.
- Seek out experienced professionals who can provide you with advice to deal with the complexities of weight management, body image, eating disorders and megarexia.

References

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