

Perceptions of body image among Malaysian male and female adolescents.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Body image concerns are common among adolescents as they undergo rapid physical growth and body shape changes. Having a distorted body image is a risk factor for the development of disordered eating behaviours and eating disorders. This study was undertaken to investigate body image concerns among Malaysian male and female adolescents aged 11-15 years. **Methods:** A total of 2,050 adolescents (1,043 males and 1,007 females) with a mean age of 13.1 +/- 0.8 years from secondary schools in Kedah and Pulau Pinang were included in the study. Questionnaires were used to collect socioeconomic data and body image indicators. **Results:** The majority (87 percent) of the adolescents were concerned with their body shape. While the majority of underweight, normal weight and overweight male and female subjects perceived their body weight status correctly according to their body mass index (BMI), a noteworthy proportion in each category misjudged their body weight. About 35.4 percent of the males and 20.5 percent of the females in the underweight category perceived themselves as having a normal weight, while 29.4 percent and 26.7 percent of the overweight males and females respectively also perceived that they had a normal weight. A higher proportion of the females (20 percent) than males (9 percent) with a normal BMI perceived themselves as fat. Most of the male (78-83 percent) and female subjects (69-74 percent) in all the BMI categories desired to be taller than their current height. An appreciable proportion of both the males (41.9 percent) and females (38.2 percent) preferred to remain thin, or even to be thinner (23.7 percent of males and 5.9 percent of females). Females had a significantly higher mean body dissatisfaction score than males, indicating their preference for a slimmer body shape. More males (49.1 percent) preferred a larger body size while more females (58.3 percent) idealised a smaller body size. Compared to normal weight and underweight subjects, overweight males and females expressed lower confidence and acceptance levels, as well as expressed greater preoccupation with and anxiety over their body weight and shape. **Conclusion:** As having a distorted body image may lead to negative effects such as unhealthy eating habits and disordered eating behaviours, it is recommended that appropriate educational efforts on body image be incorporated into school health activities for adolescents.

Keyword: Adolescents; Body image; Eating habits; School health.