

Body Image in Gymnastics: Keeping It Healthy

By: Karen Cogan, Senior Sport Psychologist, USOPC

Gymnastics is a beautiful and exciting sport. It requires precision and coordination of a multitude of details to produce outstanding performances. Skills and connections are complex and everything must repeatedly come together at the right time in the right way to produce consistent results. Because of these demands, gymnastics can be tough on the body....and body image.

Body image is defined as one's thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes about their physical appearance. In short, body image is how you feel about your body. (<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/body-image-eating-disorders>)

We want to encourage a healthy body image and acceptance in a sport where body appearance is so prominent. Unfortunately, both male and female gymnasts in all disciplines can experience body image dissatisfaction. Body image dissatisfaction is the negative evaluation of one's weight and shape. Body Image Dissatisfaction is very common and impacts both women and men, including those without eating disorders. All of us are influenced by cultural factors specific to sport which often result in unrealistic expectations.

The influence of body image and body image dissatisfaction can impact male and female gymnasts differently.

Many female gymnasts start out as young girls with a small body type that makes doing difficult skills easier. Most cannot maintain that body type in a healthy manner as they progress through normal physical maturity but may feel pressure to do so.

For men upper body strength is paramount. Male artistic gymnasts need strong legs but also need lower body leanness. Physical maturity in men is an advantage and is more accepted and embraced. The awareness of the need to achieve an ideal body type, however, can contribute to body image dissatisfaction in men as well as women.

How can athletes, coaches and parents support healthy body types, fueling and body image? Here are some suggestions:

- Encourage gymnasts to eat for healthy fueling. Restricting food intake to achieve some sort of ideal body type leads to performance decrements as well as longer term disordered eating patterns. The athlete's overall health is the priority. Restricting during formative years can have dangerous long-term consequences in terms of nutritional intake and healthy body development. Don't sacrifice the necessary nutrition during formative years for the sake of an unrealistic body type.
- Encourage gymnasts to embrace their personal body types and to value strength as well as grace.

- As a gymnast grows and matures, his or her body will change and gymnastics can become more difficult if timing is off or skills have to be performed differently. Examples include getting taller or increases in muscle mass which may mean increased weight.
- The messaging should be that this is a normal part of development. It's something to accept and embrace. We want to work to assist gymnasts to do their best gymnastics at all phases of development. Relearning some skills as a gymnast gets taller or body type changes is also a normal part of gymnastics. And while challenging, these changes can be faced with understanding and patience.
- Coaches and parents should not be monitoring a gymnast's food intake or weight. This is a dangerous set up for increased body image dissatisfaction, anxiety, low self-esteem, and potential disordered eating patterns. Weight monitoring, if needed, should be left to dietitians and sports medicine staff.
- Educate gymnasts about body image and dietary needs. Gymnasts can work with a sport psychologist or mental health professional to understand body image and how to create positive body image acceptance. Athletes can also work with a dietitian to determine healthy eating practices of optimal fueling.
- Emphasize that gymnasts are valued for more than their body appearance and performance. A focus on other strengths and attributes is important in building self-esteem. These other areas outside of gymnastics could include:
 - How gymnasts act as people and friends
 - The manner in which gymnasts live their life values
 - How gymnasts show caring for other people (e.g., volunteer work)
 - Demonstrating other strengths outside of gymnastics (e.g., artistic abilities, musical skills)
- Encourage gymnasts to embrace their bodies as strong and athletic. They can recognize how their bodies work for them to assist them in achieving their best performances.
- Make the discussions around eating and body image collaborative. Include medical professionals, sport psychologists, and dietitians. Ask athletes about goals for their bodies and energy levels and performance. From there, assist in developing realistic goals.
 - Coaches and parents can support in these conversations and learn more about body image concerns and dietary recommendations.
- Ultimately, each gymnast is responsible for making choices about his or her body, food intake and training capabilities.

Even if we do everything right and support gymnasts in excelling with their natural body type, they can still be influenced by some potentially damaging cultural factors. Social media can have a strong, sometimes negative influence on body image. As well, conversations among peers can generate negative feelings about oneself and body image. If body image dissatisfaction becomes severe or there are signs of disordered eating developing, reach out to sport psychologists, sport dietitians and/or medical professionals to find referrals for assistance. There are a variety of resources so that no one has to face this alone.

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support/contact-helpline>

<https://teamusa.org/mentalhealth>

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/ten-steps>