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“Why perfection
is flawed”»»

WINNERS REVEALED
BEAUTY
AWARD
RESULTS

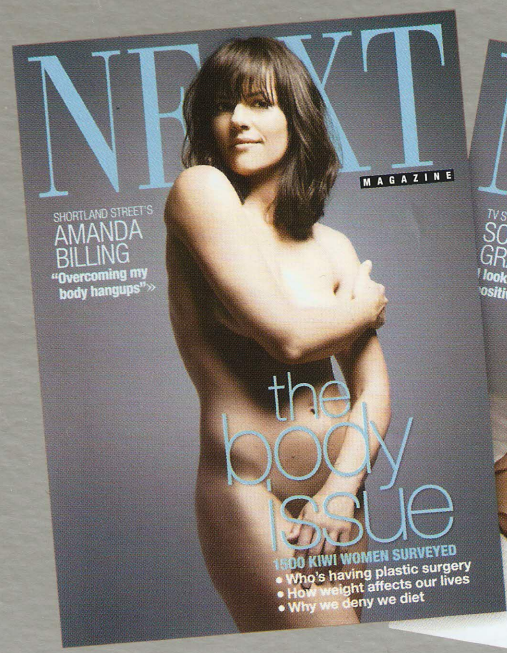
10 steps for
improving
SELF ESTEEM

SUPER
FOOD

Recipes to
EAT well &
LIVE longer

NEW SEASON
FASHION
Black & white
sheer elegance

How we REALLY
feel about our bodies and
why it's such a big deal



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DAYS
OF HEALTH
& WELLBEING
MARCH 2012

Kiwi women don't like their bodies, obsess about their weight and believe good looks and success go hand in hand. This is what we discovered when we asked more than 1500 of you your thoughts on body image. In one of the biggest surveys of its kind in New Zealand, we questioned a cross-section of women of all ages and backgrounds. We asked your opinion on plastic surgery, cosmetic treatments and diets, and found out what you see when you look in the mirror – and what that means to you.

We learned Kiwi women place huge significance on appearance, believing it can have an impact on opportunities, achievements and even happiness. A staggering 89% of you believe the way you look and present yourself is very important in succeeding in life. The high level of negativity we encountered when it comes to self-evaluation amounted to three out of four of you admitting unhappiness with your weight and only 23% feeling a level of satisfaction with your bodies in general. A massive 86% of you think about your weight daily.

But while we might be hard on ourselves, it seems we are far from judgemental of others. While 88% believe appearance is one of the top things people will judge you on, 83% of you focus solely on the positive areas of other women's figures – and only 37% immediately notice a woman's body shape when they meet her for the first time.

NEGATIVE IMAGES

So why the negativity among women when it comes to body image? Christchurch psychologist Dr Alice Boyes is unsurprised by our statistics as they are in keeping with the concept of "normative discontent" – whereby body dissatisfaction becomes the norm. The 64% of you who automatically focus on the negatives when looking at your reflection are actually typical of females the world over.

Dr Boyes believes it has a lot to do with the conflicting messages we are bombarded with daily. "There are so many pressures to restrict what we're eating – but food is so abundant and there are so many messages associating food with pleasure," she says.

Dr Judy Lightstone has worked with people battling body image issues for the past 27 years, and she agrees popular images of supposed beauty and perfection affect our

perceptions of ourselves and our bodies. Her advice to those struggling with body image is to "stop exposing yourself to negative messages", such as those which promote the idea that fat is ugly. "Or start questioning them critically rather than absorbing them."

Another factor in negative perceptions of our bodies is the quest for perfection – not least because 79% of you believe good looking people tend to get more opportunities.

"People have grown up with the message that you can be anything that you want to be," Dr Boyes says, adding this is particularly true of those in their 20s. "They want to have the great career and be the great parent and have a great body – and people can be quite perfectionist about all of those pursuits."

88% believe appearance is one of the top things people will judge you on

A WEIGHTY ISSUE

While many of you identify cellulite, post-baby bulges and unsightly upper arms as reasons for body discontent, the overriding issue for Kiwi women is what happens when we stand on the bathroom scales. A massive 75% are unhappy with their weight, while 43% of you are anxious to lose that elusive five kilos.

Is this dissatisfaction reflective of the fact we are all overweight, or is it more a case of skewed perceptions? As a nation we are unhealthily large: according to the 2011 State of the Nation Report, 63% of New Zealanders are overweight – with more than a quarter of us classed as obese. The report conducted by research firm Roy Morgan found that only 35% of us have an acceptable Body Mass Index (BMI – see box): a drop of 2% over the past decade. Among high-income countries we are second only to America in terms of size and rate of increase over the past 30 years.

Nutritionist Jacquie Dale believes that ironically, the modern obsession with dieting could be a contributing factor to the ballooning population. "I see a lot of women who wish they'd been happy when they were 60kg and that didn't happen – and now

they're 90kg: the whole dieting thing has actually made them fat." Her opinion is backed up by a study conducted by scientists at the University of California in 2007 – which found that within five years, two thirds of dieters gained back more weight than they initially lost. As psychologist Dr Lightstone points out: "If you want to gain weight then go on a diet!"

Our experts aren't heartened by the fact only 15% of those we surveyed say they regularly diet. "Diet has become a dirty word because there's so much research which reveals diets cause all kinds of problems," Dr Lightstone says. "Everybody now says they're not dieting because dieting is bad, so they call it something else – 'eating

healthily' or 'just watching what I eat.'"

On that note, 54% of you reveal you don't diet but set yourself rules about what you eat. Dale believes that's all well and good but: "There's healthy rules and there's bad rules." For those who really feel they need rules around their dietary habits, she believes a good formula is to avoid mindless eating. "Don't eat standing up, don't eat in the car, don't eat in front of the TV, don't multi-task and eat." The nutritionist warns against trying any regime that promises to shed kilos speedily – as they generally involve losing more water than fat. "We generally recommend maximum loss of 1% of your body mass each week – so if you weigh 60kg it would be 600g a week safely and surely."

MIND OVER MATTER

No matter whether you are among the 9% of women who are sized six to eight or the 16% who wear an 18, there's no denying that we are obsessive when it comes to dwelling on our figures. Our survey shows 87% of us are thinking about our bodies daily and 52% admit to thinking about their proportions several times a day.

These results are backed up by research conducted by weight loss company Atkins

last September. They spoke to 1300 women and found more than a third thought about food and dieting more than they thought about their partner – and 54% confessed to thinking about food more than they think about sex.

Psychologist Dr Boyes believes such focus on our weight is unhealthy over a sustained period of time – but adds that people often go through periods of focusing on their bodies; “you’d hope it wouldn’t be a lifelong thing.”

She adds, “People think about it a lot when they’re trying to find a partner – appearance cues are really salient during that phase. Other life stages can bring it up again: it might be especially pertinent for people after pregnancy or following a break-up.”

Just as episodes in our lives can impact on our perceptions of our bodies, so it goes the

other way – meaning when we have one of those fat days, it can affect relationships and our interaction with others.

“For women it’s very hard to separate their lives from their bodies because so much focus is on the body,” says Dr Lightstone, who runs a Psychosomatic Integration facility in Auckland. “If you’re unhappy with your life you blame your body; if you’re unhappy with your body, you say if you could only fix your body your life would be fine.”

On the upside, the psychologist believes that we become less obsessive about our weight as we age.

“You’re much more judged on your appearance when you’re younger, the older you get the more you’re invisible – and it becomes much less important. You may look back and see how silly it was.”

Think tank

How many times a day do you think about life’s basic necessities?

	Women	Men
Sex	10 times	19 times
Food	15 times	18 times
Sleep	8.5 times	11 times

Body Mass Index

BMI is designed for people between the ages of 18 and 65. You can work out yours by dividing your weight in kilograms by your height in metres squared. For example, if you weigh 65kg and your height is 1.7m, the calculation is $65 \div 2.89 (1.7m \times 1.7m) = 22.5$.

A BMI below 18.5 indicates you are underweight. For NZ Europeans a BMI over 25 is classed as overweight, and 30 or more is obese. For Maori and Pacific Islanders, a BMI over 26 suggests overweight; 32 or more is classed as obese.

A major worldwide report published in medical journal *The Lancet* last year revealed the average BMI of a Kiwi female is 27.38. Although BMI can be a useful guideline, many health professionals prefer not to use it as it fails to distinguish between body fat and muscle mass.

Follow these tips to feel better about yourself and improve your body image

1 Mirror exposure

Stand in front of the mirror and describe your body as if you were explaining it to a blind person. Don’t say what’s good and bad about it – and don’t skip over the parts you dislike. “In this way you’re counteracting the evaluative tendency and just practising describing what you see rather than evaluating it,” psychologist Dr Boyes says.

2 Situation exposure

Make a list of things that frighten you when it comes to body image on a scale from one to 100, with 100 being the worst. It might be wearing tank tops to show off your arms, or going running in shorts along a busy road. Try to put things in five-point increments. Then practise doing that thing until on your scale it is half as anxiety-provoking as it once was. “We know from research studies that exposure techniques are really good for changing thoughts,” Dr Boyes says.

3 Weigh yourself right

For those who weigh themselves regularly – or go through stages of weighing themselves all the time – put some structure into when you do this. Weigh yourself once a week, and instead of judging each measurement, take the average of the past three weights. Also mark your cycle, as you can go up around your period. “Weight is not a perfect measure, but body image perceptions are so psychologically based, and they can feel good one day and bad the next. Having an objective measure is really helpful,” Dr Boyes says.

4 Experiment

If your dietary routine is ruling your life, experiment with forbidden food. Make a list of those foods that you only eat in the context of a binge and those which are really scary. Then try to eat them normally. “There are two types of restricting: one is physiological so you’re just restricting yourself, and the

other is psychological restriction,” Dr Boyes says. “If you had a rule that you’re only allowed to eat orange food, you’d develop a binge craving for any food that wasn’t orange. So whenever we put a psychological restriction in it creates risk of bingeing.”

5 Plan

If you are erratic in your eating habits, start planning the times you’re going to eat – and aim for at least once every four hours. “It’s important to get out of that cycle of under eating and overeating – and saying ‘I’ll start the diet on Monday so it’s okay if I eat a family bag of chips now,’” Dr Boyes says. “Getting off that cycle helps with body image a lot.”

6 Self-esteem pie chart

Make two pie charts. In one put your current sources of self-esteem and in the other put your ideal sources of self-esteem. “Someone with an eating disorder might say 80% of their self-esteem is around their ability to control or not control their eating – and that crowds out the room for everything else,” Dr Boyes says. “And then we do the ideal and the person makes room for things like being a good friend, being environmentally conscious or being a good musician. Recognising more diverse forms of self-esteem is really good.”