

Young and thin, old and fragile

■ Young Choctaw County girls may have bone density problems later in life

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN – For nearly half of the white 8th grade girls in Choctaw County last year, looking in the mirror was not a positive experience. In fact, 40% of them said that what they saw in the mirror was a body that was too fat.

And 25% of them said they would do anything to change that.

A Choctaw Sun survey of middle school students in local schools last March revealed an alarming problem for girls as young as 12 years of age. For a large percentage of white adolescent females, the desire to be thin was so evident that it could potentially drive them to drastic measures.

With cases of excessive dieting, anorexia, and bulimia growing among adolescents nationwide, that desperation to be thin becomes even more frightening because of the serious health consequences accompany it. From physical to emotional consequences, struggling to be thin can lead to a host of immediate problems for young teens.

But they may also suffer serious health complications decades later – even 40 to 50 years afterward.

According to a report released in early February, teens who have anorexia or bulimia – or even those who diet excessively at a young age – are



When young girls look in the mirror today, they may see themselves as overweight ... Later in life, they may see osteoporosis.

There is a significant link between excessive dieting and eating disorders in young teenage girls and osteoporosis in later life.

at a high risk for osteoporosis and severe bone fractures later in life. A study by the International Osteoporosis Foundation (IOF) revealed that young girls who diet frequently or obsessively can significantly increase their risk of the bone density loss and fractures associated with the disease.

In fact, the study estimates that anorexia patients who suffer from the illness for six years have an annual fracture rate seven times greater than a healthy woman of the same age.

Although osteoporosis usually occurs after menopause, its causes are

set in motion much earlier in life. During the early teenage years in particular, eating a healthy diet with enough calcium, vitamin D and proteins is necessary to build maximum bone growth and to protect against bone density disease later in life.

Unfortunately, that is also the age when many girls begin to develop a negative body image that leads to dieting and eating disorders.

"The age at which most women develop anorexia is during the teenage age years which is also when bones develop the fastest and they

develop their peak bone mass," said Paul Spencer Sochaczewski, of the IOF. "If they miss out on that, they are going to be damaging their bone health in later life."

National studies over the past few years show that young people are becoming focused on their body image at alarmingly younger ages. According to a report by the National Institute on Media and the Family, at age thirteen, 53% of American girls say that they are "unhappy with their bodies." This increases to 78% by the time they reach seventeen.

By the time they

40% of white 8th grade girls in Choctaw County last year said that they believe they are too fat ... and 25% said they'd do anything to change that.

reach 6th grade, most young people are already exhibiting a distortion of that image, obsessing about areas where they see imperfections and struggling to change them.

In a national study of pre-adolescent children aged 10 and 11, American girls were already demonstrating a desire to be thinner, with many of them acting on that desire through crash diets, obsessive exercise, anorexia, and bulimia. In fact, in a survey of girls 9 and 10 years old, 40% say they have tried to lose weight, according to a study by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

A Harvard University study of nearly 50,000 girls in 2000 showed that the majority listed appearance as their biggest concern. The study also indicated that about 90% of teenage girls think often about their body shape, and 86% of them were dieting or considering at the time of the survey.

In Choctaw County last year, girls as young as 6th grade admitted to being dissatisfied with their body image, with 15% of white girls as young as 12 years old already taking steps to lose weight.

While studies do show that a growing percentage of children and teens in the United States – and especially in Alabama – are, in fact overweight, a significant percentage of those who are dieting excessively and at younger ages are doing so because of what they perceive as negative societal

pressures to conform to 'model' body types.

That 'fashion model' thinness concept has come under fire recently, with fashion designers in several countries issuing new regulations forbidding ultra-thin models from being displayed in high-level fashion shows. The new regulations are being issued, for the most part, out of an awareness of the negative influence ultra-thinness has had on young people.

Apart from the lack of nutrition brought on by eating disorders and excessive dieting, that ultra-thinness itself can cause a significant increase in osteoporosis and fractures due to lack of bone density.

The IOF estimates that one third of women over 50 will suffer from fractures due to osteoporosis in their lifetimes. But an analysis of 60,000 men and women showed that the risk of hip fracture doubled in people who simply exhibited a body mass index (BMI) of 20 compared to people with a BMI of 25.

In one of the most visible signs of osteoporosis, a 10% loss of bone mass can double the risk of fractures involving the vertebrae, and those tiny fractures can lead to a 'stooped-over' appearance in later years, especially among small white women.

For the 40% of white 8th grade girls in Choctaw County, the desire to see a thin body in the mirror today may lead to the sight of a fragile, fracture-prone body in the mirror in years to come.



Children's Dental Health Month

Shakera Gould, Taran Sumlin, and Chastity Mazingo were just three of the students in Mrs. Linda Mosley's 3rd grade classroom to receive new toothbrushes and other goodies from dental hygienists Emily Gray and Libby Singley during a visit to their classroom this week.

Choctaw Sun photos by Dee Ann Campbell
As part of Children's Dental Health Month, staff members from Dr. Leanne McDonald's office in Butler visited Southern Choctaw Elementary on Tuesday, to give the students information about taking care of their teeth. Pictured in dental hygienist Libby Singley as she talks with the students.

Spirit of Luke ministries
will be in Gilberttown this
Saturday morning at 10 a.m. at
the Gilberttown Nutrition Center
for FREE health screenings and
other services.

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