

Extent of body image dissatisfaction and factors related to exercise among 45-64 year-old men who attend a gym: A cross-sectional study

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Background: Few studies have explored body image in adult men. In England, among men, the 45-64 year olds are those who have the highest prevalence of obesity ⁽¹⁾. While discussing health concerns can provide motivation to exercise and become more body aware, it may inadvertently lower body image satisfaction. This study aimed to investigate body image satisfaction and factors associated with exercise in men aged 45-64 who attend a gym.

Methods: Male regular gym users aged 45-64 were recruited in a gym. Data was collected using a cross-sectional questionnaire consisting of two 10-point Likert scales on body weight and shape satisfaction (1=very low satisfaction), the Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI) ⁽²⁾, the Exercise Addiction Inventory (EAI) ⁽³⁾, and questions about activities, people who initially influenced them to attend a gym, and reasons for exercising. EAI scores ≥ 24 indicated likely exercise addiction ⁽³⁾. Reasons for exercising were grouped as relating to body image or not. The association between the three body image variables and the other factors was analysed in SPSS using the Spearman's rank test and Kruskal Wallis test. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Hertfordshire (LMS/UG/UH/03918).

Results: Forty-four men participated. One was excluded due to multiple extreme outlying responses. Appearance anxiety was very low (median [IQR]: 2.0 [1.0-4.0]). The participants felt somewhat satisfied with their weight (median [IQR]: 8.0 [4.0-8.0]) and shape (median [IQR]: 7.0 [4.0-8.0]), although 18.6% and 16.3% respectively had very low scores (1-3). 9.3% were likely to be addicted to exercise (mean [SD]: 18.2 [3.4]). The main initial influencers included themselves only (65.1%), relatives (27.9%), sports or health professionals (4.7%), and "others" (2.3%). 55.8 % mentioned body image reasons for exercising. No statistically significant correlations were found between AAI, weight satisfaction, body shape satisfaction and EAI, except between weight and shape satisfaction ($r_s = -0.85$, $p = 0.000$, $n = 43$). There was no association between the initial influencers or reasons for exercising and the three body image variables, except between body shape satisfaction and the reasons for exercising ($\chi^2(1) = 4.804$, $p = 0.028$).

Discussion: While appearance anxiety was very low, about one in six men were dissatisfied with their weight and/or shape. This is lower than dissatisfaction reported in women regarding thinness and muscularity ⁽⁴⁾, yet still potentially problematic. Body image was a reason for many to exercise, especially those with a low shape satisfaction. Programmes should promote health and fitness whilst being careful with references to body image. Lastly, since family and friends played a more important role in the decision to attend a gym than health professionals and trainers, collaborating with the former may be important to support gym attendance.

Conclusion: This population group has a low risk of excessive body image preoccupation when measured as appearance anxiety while body image satisfaction and exercise addiction should be explored on a greater scale.

References:

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