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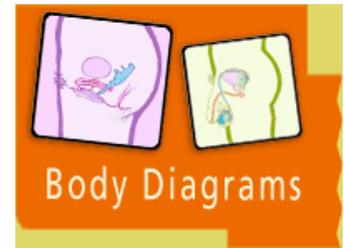
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Do I Look Weird? How Guys Can Feel Better about Their Bodies

by Heather Boerner, 10.09.07

You're a teenage guy, and the thought of someone — especially that someone you have a crush on — seeing you naked fills you with dread. You feel generally freakish: You think your penis is small and misshapen and you have hair in weird places. Maybe you think you're too skinny, too fat, or have the torso of a sickly nine-year-old.

The only solution is to avoid any and all romantic relationships for the rest of your life - right?

Wrong, says Leigh Cohn, co-author of *Making Weight: Men's Conflicts with Food, Weight, Shape and Appearance*. While many, and perhaps most, teens are embarrassed about their bodies in one way or another (and so are adults, by the way), your insecurities about your body don't have to hold you back.

It's Not Just a Girl Thing

While almost everyone knows that girls worry about how they look, most don't recognize that the same is true in guys.

"Some research shows that most men would like to change their weight also," says Cohn, who speaks at colleges around the country on weight and eating disorder issues among guys. "They either want to lose weight or they'd like to put on weight in the form of muscle. Many would like to do both. With boys, we don't talk about body shame as much as we talk about body insecurities — the belief that your body is supposed to be different than it is."

Indeed, some guys find it hard to let their bodies be seen in public or in private. Locker rooms and swimming pools, let alone sexually charged situations, can be pretty scary for the self-conscious.

People for whom body image rules their life — and who don't have any real body problems to contend with — are said to have "body dysmorphic disorder." A 2007 study of men with the disorder found that some men can be so disabled by their body shame that they can't hold jobs. Some would rather spend time at the gym in pursuit of the perfect body than be with their partners. And for many, it makes sex no fun at all.

Ready, Set, Sex!

So if you're feeling weird about your body, should you wait to have sex until you feel better?

"Can you enjoy it? Can you be fulfilled sexually and can you fulfill your partner sexually?" Cohn asks. "Having a healthy body image is essential for that. If you're insecure about your body, you can have sex, but you may not feel fulfilled by it. You may be thinking that you didn't look good enough."

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Of course, having sex isn't just about feeling comfortable with your body. You also need to be aware of the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and how to protect yourself against both. So, when you think you're ready to have sex, talk to your partner about all of these issues — including the way you feel about your body — before you have sex.

Making Friends with Your Body

Want to be ready for sex? Want to put off having sex for a while? In either case, learn to like your body. Consider these steps:

- **Realize that feeling bad about your body may seem normal, but it's not.** Nancy Brown, a senior research associate at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation Research Institute and an expert in adolescent development, says that when a guy starts puberty his body is changing so quickly that it's normal to feel weird and ashamed of his body. But after that, body shame usually comes from media images and other unhealthy influences. "It comes from our culture," she says. "Boys are now expected to reach the same unrealistic beauty standards that girls are."
- **Avoid the people and things that tell you how you should look.** Switch off TV shows that focus on appearances, says Brown. Put down that magazine that tells you how perfect your life will be when you finally achieve those six-pack abs. And don't engage in conversations with friends about how much weight they can lift and how big their pecs are getting.
- **Take a look at your family.** Sit down with family pictures, and perhaps a parent or a safe adult to talk about your body and how it relates to other body types in your family. "Weight and body type has nothing to do with body mass index charts," says Cohn. "It's based on genetics, activity level, and our diets. I can look at pictures of myself, my sons, and my father, and see that we have the same body type as we age. We have the same rounded shoulders, the same indentation around the waist, and the same extra muscle in the bicep area."
- **Cozy up to the mirror.** Does the idea of looking at your naked body in the mirror sound awful and ridiculous? The idea is to learn what your body really looks like, and then to start "loving your body for whatever size or shape it is," Cohn says. "I tell people to get naked and stand in front of the mirror until they feel like, 'Yeah, this is my body. This is good. I like this.'"

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