Reading Diet Articles Could Be Unhealthy

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It possibly would be helpful to teen girls if their mothers didn't have those types of magazines around.

Magazine headlines entice teenage girls with promises: 'Get the body you want' and 'Hit your dream weight now!' But a new study suggests reading articles about diet and weight loss could have unhealthy consequences later.

Teenage girls who frequently read magazine articles about dieting were more likely five years later to practice extreme weight-loss measures such as vomiting than girls who never read such articles, the University of Minnesota study found.

It didn't seem to matter whether the girls were overweight when they started reading about weight loss, nor whether they considered their weight important. After taking those factors into account, researchers still found reading articles about dieting predicted later unhealthy weight loss behavior.

Girls in middle school who read dieting articles were twice as likely five years later to try to lose weight by fasting or smoking cigarettes, compared to girls who never read such articles. They were three times more likely to use measures such as vomiting or taking laxatives, the study found.

'The articles may be offering advice such as cutting out trans fats and soda, and those are good ideas for everybody,' said Alison Field of Harvard Medical School, who has done similar research but wasn't
involved in the new study. 'But the underlying messages these articles send are 'You should be concerned about your weight and you should be doing something.'"

The study appeared in January's issue of the journal Pediatrics.

Its findings were based on surveys and weight-height measurements of 2,516 middle school students in 1999 and again in 2004. About 45 percent of the students were boys.

Only 14 percent of boys reported reading diet articles frequently, compared to 44 percent of girls. For those boys who did read about weight loss, there was no similar lasting effect on behavior.

In the new study, it was unclear whether it was the diet articles themselves or accompanying photographs of thin models that made a difference. The study didn't ask teenagers which magazines they read, only how frequently they read magazine articles 'in which dieting or weight loss are discussed.'

The study was based on students' self-reports about their behavior and, like all surveys, could be skewed by teenagers telling researchers what they think they want to hear, said study co-author Patricia van den Berg.

She said parents should carefully consider whether they want their daughters reading about weight loss.

'It possibly would be helpful to teen girls if their mothers didn't have those types of magazines around,' van den Berg said. Parents also should discuss magazines' messages with their daughters, she said.

'Talk to your kids about where these messages are coming from,' she said.

Doctors' waiting rooms are no place for magazines promoting diet and weight loss, she said, 'in the same way you don't have materials promoting smoking in waiting rooms.'

Nathan Christopher, a spokesman for Seventeen magazine, said
health is important to the magazine's readers. He wouldn't comment specifically on the study because it was unclear which magazines the teenagers read.

'We have always featured information to help them lead healthy lives, including fitness tips, first-person health stories, and nutrition facts. Promoting a healthy body image is a priority, so each issue of Seventeen features teens with realistic body types,' he said.

In January, Seventeen magazine and its Web site will kick off a yearlong program called 'New Body, New You,' which will feature expert advice on nutrition, health and fitness topics, he said.

The study adds to evidence that girls' attitudes toward their bodies are shaped by popular culture.

Previous studies have found that images of thin fashion models give girls immediate negative feelings about their bodies. Public awareness of the issue increased in September when Madrid's Fashion Week banned underweight models and again with the Nov. 14 death of anorexic Brazilian model Ana Carolina Reston.

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