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## Unlike Girls, Teenage Boys Don't Want To Be Skinny

By Beth Greenfield

While so many girls are busy striving for skinniness, some teen boys are fearfully trying to avoid it—to the point of being driven to depression and dangerous steroid use if they believe that they are too underweight. That's according to a pair of new studies by Harvard Medical School researcher Aaron Blashill, who says that notions of masculinity are partly to blame.

“For many boys and men, having a muscular, lean physique is an outward representation of masculinity,” Blashill tells Yahoo Shine. “So a fear of feminization is intimately linked to these fears.” Some boys are so susceptible to cultural messages of having to be muscular to be manly that they start to develop body-image distortion, much like thin girls who see themselves as fat. And those who feel unable to achieve the built-but-lean ideal as dictated by popular culture, he adds, “are suffering, and may be taking drastic measures.”

The studies, both published online in late December in the American Psychological Association's journal *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* (but publicized by the APA on Monday), looked at the risks faced by boys who inaccurately see themselves as being too skinny—as compared with those who inaccurately see themselves as overweight and those who accurately see themselves as too thin, heavy or average. They found that while all teen boys who see themselves unclearly are more susceptible to depression and other issues than those who don't, those who see themselves as too skinny fare the worst of all.

For his research, Blashill looked at two large, nationally representative samples of teenage boys in the United States. The first included 2,139 young men who were followed from the age of 16 to 29; the next set of data came from a 2009 nationally representative survey of 8,065 boys in the United States in the ninth through 12th grades. Through that larger set of data, Blashill found that the depression boys experience from feeling underweight may lead to steroid use—as well as bullying—at some point in life. “Regarding victimization, boys who perceive themselves as underweight may be vulnerable due to perpetrators also perceiving them as underweight, and thus, weak and easy targets,” Blashill writes in that study, “A Dual Pathway Model of Steroid Use Among Adolescent Boys.”

The problem of boys suffering from body-image distortion and even eating disorders is relatively new but growing quickly, and experts in the field attribute it largely to cultural messages.

“There has certainly been a traumatic increase in the emphasis on male body image over the last 30 to 40 years,” [Dr. Harrison Pope](#), director of the Biological Psychological Laboratory at [McLean Hospital](#)/Harvard Medical School, tells Yahoo Shine. “I can't remember anyone worrying if they had a six-pack of abdominal muscles when I was in high school. Now it's reflected by many aspects of culture, and why that has happened is less clear. But a somewhat cynical theory is that advertisers for body-related products thought they had already saturated the female market, and if they could only succeed in making men feel insecure about their image, they would get that other half of the population, too.”

It certainly seems like they've succeeded. A November [study](#) published in JAMA Pediatrics found that nearly 20 percent of boys aged 12 to 18 are extremely concerned about the state of their bodies, with most being concerned about muscularity. Similarly, a 2012 [study](#) found that more than 40 percent of boys in middle school and high school said they regularly exercised with the goal of increasing muscle mass, while 38 percent said they used protein supplements, and nearly 6 percent said they had experimented with steroids. Meanwhile, reports of “musclerexia,” or “bigorexia,” that male quest for bigger muscles, are on the rise.

It's sadly not surprising, Blashill notes; the phenomenon is just like anorexia among women. “The sociocultural messages we are all susceptible to are very gendered,” he says. “Women tend to internalize an ideal of thinness. For men, it's what's called a mesomorphic physique—highly muscular and lean, with low fat content,” rather than just huge and brawny, he explains. “So boys' and girls' messages are different but equally unattainable.”