

Extreme dieting can permanently wreck your health

By Mirror.co.uk [7/04/2008](#)

Many of us long to be skinny. We diet, skip meals and exercise in a desperate attempt to be the thinnest we can be. But is it worth the risks?

For Victoria Beckham, with the world always talking about how much you weigh, that pressure to stay slim is magnified tenfold.

The truth though is being too skinny can permanently damage your health - or even cost you your life. Here's how losing too much affects your body...

YOUR LOOKS

It doesn't take a genius to work out that severely limiting calorie intake will deprive your body of vital nutrients. "Carbs, fat and protein are the building blocks of body tissue and, when nutrients are short, the body preserves what it has for vital organs such as the brain and heart," says Dr Helena Fox, consultant psychiatrist at the eating disorders unit of Capio Nightingale private hospitals.

As a result, tissues such as hair, skin and nails are the first to miss out, leaving you looking less than glowing. "Underweight people often get spots or dry skin because they lack enough nutrients to repair tissue. Their skin eventually becomes more prone to premature wrinkling," explains Dr Fox.

Added to that, rapid weight-loss leads to stretchmarks as the skin loses elasticity, which explains why the troubled and ever-shrinking Amy Winehouse was pictured with stretchmarks on her boobs.

To stay healthy and supple, skin needs vitamins A, C, E and essential fatty acids. But don't assume you can get adequate quantities from supplements. "If the body is under-nourished, it won't be able to absorb nutrients from supplements," says Dr Fox.

Added to that, hair goes dry, thin and may even fall out. Louise Redknapp lost a stone for ITV documentary *The Truth About Size Zero*, in order to illustrate the associated health dangers of being that size (equivalent to a UK size 4). She was only on the diet for four weeks but, in that short time, her hair broke off and thinned.

But it's not just the hair on your head that's affected. "Your temperature drops when you're under-nourished so the body compensates by growing an extra layer of hair on your cheeks and back," says Dr Fox. Nice!

And to finish the look, a lack of calcium will eventually weaken teeth, leading to decay.

HOW YOU FEEL

It's no surprise that if you're hungry all the time, you're not going to be on top form. Dr Fox warns that you can get low blood sugar within a day of cutting back.

"This leads to confusion, poor concentration, dizziness and low energy levels," she says.

And on just 800 calories a day (as opposed to the 1,800 dietitians say the average woman should consume) Louise Redknapp was irritable and so tired that she couldn't summon enough energy to play with her two-year-old son, Charley.

In the longer term, a lack of nutrients can also lead to depression, according to Dr Fox. This is because the body isn't able to make neurotransmitters (brain chemicals) such as serotonin, which boost mood.

Rocker Courtney Love lost three stone in three months by putting a lock on the fridge and making her housekeeper take home the key every night.

She now sticks to two meal replacement shakes a day for breakfast and lunch followed by steamed fish and veg for dinner.

"It's like kicking drugs," she says.

YOUR FERTILITY

Being underweight affects reproduction at every stage. Angelina Jolie reportedly dropped to a minuscule 7st - worryingly thin for her 5ft 8in frame - after the death of her mother in January 2007. But she allegedly told friends that she intended to gain weight so she and Brad Pitt could add another baby to their family.

Dr Fox explains: "Under the stress of extreme dieting or over-exercising, the body suppresses production of fertility hormones. This not only lowers sex drive but stops ovulation, so you can't get pregnant. The first sign is lighter, more irregular periods then, eventually, periods stop altogether. It's the body's way of protecting itself from the stress of pregnancy during starvation."

Most women regain their fertility when they eat healthily again but a small proportion won't.

Unfortunately, problems don't stop at conception. "Poor nutrition during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, premature birth, defects and even health problems for the baby in later life," says Dr Fox. "Particularly crucial are the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, when the baby's organs are formed."

Statistics show that most babies born under 26 weeks don't survive and that only 20 per cent of those that do are free from disability or learning difficulties.

BONES

In 2007, Nikki Grahame from Big Brother 7 was diagnosed with the bone-thinning disease osteoporosis due to years of extreme dieting. The disease, which leads to bone fractures, usually affects post-menopausal women but has affected Nikki at just 25.

"The hormone oestrogen is vital for making new bone," explains Dr Fox. "Women who go on an extreme diet may stop producing oestrogen, which means their bones become weak."

The National Osteoporosis Society warns the disease may lead to bone fractures, which can eventually cause loss of height and a curved spine. Also, hip fractures cause more than 1,150 premature deaths in the UK each month. Anyone who has missed periods for six months or more due to over-dieting or over-exercising is at risk of the disease and should see their GP. Call the NOS helpline on 0845 450 0230 or visit www.nos.org.uk

VITAL ORGANS

When you go on a crash diet, it's not just fat you lose. "Losing weight rapidly results in muscle loss but it's not just your biceps that are affected," explains Dr Fox.

"Exactly the same thing is happening to your heart muscle. Because your body isn't getting energy from food, it converts body tissue into glucose for energy. If the heart loses too much muscle, it can't pump properly, leading to an irregular heartbeat, which can result in a heart attack. This can happen within just a few weeks." Also filling up on too much water to stave off hunger, or on the other hand being dehydrated from a lack of food, may alter the body's balance of fluids and electrolytes (minerals such as sodium and potassium), triggering kidney and heart failure.

In the long term, it's also bad news for the brain. "The brain tissue shrinks, showing similar changes to those in dementia sufferers," says Dr Fox. "Lack of B complex vitamins will also damage nerves, causing numbness and pins and needles."

BLOOD

Brazilian model Ana Carolina Reston died last year from a generalised infection caused by anorexia. At 5ft 8in, she weighed just 6st 4lb. "Being underweight affects production of the white blood cells that fight infection, so your immunity suffers," says Dr Fox.

Your blood may also develop clotting problems and you risk iron-deficiency anaemia, a condition caused by low levels of red blood cells, which carry oxygen around the body.

Symptoms include tiredness, breathlessness, dizziness, palpitations, headaches, pale skin, brittle nails, cracked lips and an inflamed tongue. If untreated, it puts a strain on the heart and can be fatal.

WHAT'S TOO THIN?

The World Health Organisation says anyone with a body mass index (BMI) of less than 18.5 is underweight. The normal range is 18.5 to 24.9 - 25 to 30 is overweight, and 30 to 40 is obese. To get yours, multiply your height in metres by itself then divide the answer into your weight in kilograms.

However, not everyone who's at risk is officially underweight. Dr Helena Fox explains: "If you lose a lot of weight quickly, you still risk health problems such as heart or kidney failure."

Many dieticians advise losing only one or two pounds per week.