

A healthy weight, which is both sustainable and good for performance, will ultimately vary with each individual. Tiffany Bonasera speaks with athletes and experts about what is the optimal size and shape for running.

FEW of us are satisfied with the way we look. In a snap poll of my female friends, no one could honestly say they felt completely comfortable with their body. All of them admitted there was at least something they'd like to change. For the majority, losing a couple of kilos ranked at the top of the list. It's a sad reflection of our society really, that so many women are discontent, prompting them to try any number of weight-loss schemes and questionable diets in search of a quick fix.

Female athletes are not immune to this pressure. But for them, it's not just society setting unrealistic standards, their weight and body fat levels can also have an influence on performance. Distance runners, who are carrying too few kilos, can experience loss of their menstrual cycle, which can affect their bone density, cause stress fractures, reduce strength and possibly lead to osteoporosis later in life. Alternatively, carrying excess body weight means an athlete will use up more energy, which impacts on their endurance and speed. The hard part is finding a happy medium.

There is no definitive answer to what is a healthy weight. There's no magic number on the scales that athletes should be trying to target, just like there is no miracle training program that can guarantee success. Weight is a tricky topic to discuss because it's personal and can be emotive for many people. What I've endeavoured to do in this article is offer different perspectives and experiences for you to draw on in determining what is a healthy weight for you.

Distance running and weight

Elite distance runners typically have low body fat levels. If you think of some of Australia's elite runners, such as Kerryn McCann, Benita Johnson and Anna Thompson, they would definitely fit into this category. It's certainly an advantage when you have to carry your body weight over many kilometres. According to sports dietitian, Michelle Cort, from the Australia Institute of Sport in Canberra, a combination of well-chosen parents and the high volume of training by elite runners are the reasons they tend to have low body fat.

But an ideal body weight for elite runners may not necessarily be best for recreational runners who train primarily for fitness and health.

"What is a healthy weight is a difficult one to answer, it's very individual," she says. "It depends on what level the athlete is, whether they're elite or not, and it also depends on a person's performance history and what the ideal weight for the particular sport is."

Senior sport psychologist Paul Penna, from the New South Wales Institute of Sport, says in a sport like distance running an athlete will often concentrate on changing their weight when they're not performing rather than looking at the bigger picture.

"Athletes often don't gain enough information about how their performance improves and they'll do more or less of what they've been doing, like losing weight or putting on weight. But more (or less) doesn't mean you'll achieve a better performance," he says.

Emily Dwyer (nee Morris), 27, who has run

Emily Dwyer (nee Morris) sandwiched between Melissa Rollison and Libby Allen at the 2002 Campbelltown Athletics Grand Prix - Getty Images



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the seventh fastest time in Australian history over 5000m (15.18.80), agrees that a healthy running weight depends on the individual and requires a sensible approach.

"An ideal body weight for an athlete is probably lighter than a normal person, but you can't maintain that weight for long," she says. "It's the same as you can't be at your peak for long. In the off-season, it's okay to carry a bit more weight," says Emily.

Perceptions and pressure

Female distance runners are typically high achievers in many areas of their lives, which is the reason a sport like running appeals to them because to succeed you require discipline and self-motivation. The downside is, when a person with this drive and determination sets their mind to something, they will work relentlessly towards achieving it, often to their own detriment. An athlete's judgement about what a healthy weight is, for example, can be clouded by their desire to compete and compare themselves with others.

Sydney-based athlete Jenny Dallaway, 33, who has been running competitively since she was in primary school, says from her experience, women are their own worst enemies.

"There's always that pressure [to be lean]. Female distance runners are always sizing each other up," says Jenny.

The trouble is, says Paul Penna, athletes become too focused on what they eat (or what they don't eat) as a means of controlling weight, which can develop into an unhealthy pattern of behaviour.

"A sport like distance running predisposes them to disordered eating, not necessarily eating disorders," says Paul. "An athlete might think, 'I've had

this particular meal and I performed really well."

Being in a training group or training camp situation can amplify these issues because athletes can be influenced by what others are doing. Emily admits she's fallen into the trap of following the diets of other athletes when on a training camp. With a diet normally high in carbohydrates, Emily switched to a low carb, low fat diet because it seemed to be working for others. But she says it was a big mistake.

"You cannot copy someone else's eating plan. It's all about what feels best for you. If you're craving sugar, eat sugar, if you feel like carbs, eat carbs," says Emily.

Like Emily, Jenny has been involved in training camp environments where other athletes have shown traits of disordered eating.

"Rather than have a bowl of cereal in a bowl, they'll have it in a cup because it's a smaller portion," says Jenny. "But they'll keep refilling it and probably eat more than if they'd put it in the bowl in the first place."

The flipside of this is a fascination by people who are not associated with the sport in watching what an athlete eats, then making remarks on how much or how little is consumed. It's a common scenario, particularly in the workplace, according to Jenny, and one she finds uncomfortable. She says she'll often make a conscious decision to eat a chocolate bar, for example, away from prying eyes simply because she knows it will provoke comment by some colleagues.

The problem is, situations like these contribute to an athlete feeling self-conscious about what they're putting in their mouth, which can potentially lead to unhealthy patterns of behaviour in regards to weight management.

The influence of a coach

A coach, just like parents and friends, has a huge impact on a female athlete's self-worth and self-concept. This relationship is a very important one and can influence her perception of what is a healthy weight.

Paul Penna says in track and field, unlike many

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other sports, there's basically a one athlete, one coach relationship. The role of a coach is very broad. It includes being the person who writes an athlete's program and oversees their training, to sports psychologist, nutritionist, mentor and masseur.

"The coach does a lot of everything and this person has a heap of power.

But that doesn't mean they have all the answers," says Paul.

According to Paul, coaching is all about managing a relationship and how best to communicate with someone. Some coaches will naturally be better equipped to communicate positively and effectively than others in dealing with female athletes and their emotional needs. Coaches need to be particularly careful about discussing weight issues with an athlete. An uninformed comment about needing to lose a few kilos or comparing one athlete's physique favourably over another's can have serious consequences.

Thankfully, Paul says coaches are increasingly aware of their duty of care when working with impressionable athletes.

"The 60's and 70's coaching mentality sometimes meant athletes were given inappropriate feedback or comments, [about their weight] but there's certainly less of that now."

According to Emily, who has been in the sport since participating in Little Athletics, female junior athletes are especially vulnerable about weight issues but she urges them not to focus on it. Instead, they need to make sure they're really eating well and nourishing their bodies to cope with the inevitable changes ahead.

"Being a young athlete, don't worry about your weight at all," Emily says. "You are what you eat, but don't get obsessed about weight."

Like a coach, friends and family play a part in an athlete's healthy development. For an athlete, it can get a little confusing when they're receiving mixed messages about their weight. Both Emily and Jenny agree that there is often a significant disparity between how friends and family perceive your weight and how a coach does.

"You know when your family says you're looking good you're probably carrying too much weight," says Emily. "When you're at a good race weight you never look good in clothes."

The challenge is for the athlete to understand their own body and set a realistic weight target, balancing wellbeing and performance.

"You know you're at the right weight when you start PBing and when your coach is starting to tell you you're looking good," says Emily.

Maintaining a balanced diet

An athlete's training and racing program fluctuates during the year, which means to maintain a healthy weight their diet will also need adjusting. Sports dietician Michelle Cort says this is highly individual and advises athletes to seek out help



USEFUL WEBSITES:

Sports Dietitians Australia
www.sportsdietitians.com.au

Australian Institute of Sport
www.ais.org.au

NSW Institute of Sport
www.nswis.com.au

if they're not sure how their food intake requires tweaking for peak performance and weight control.

"It depends on a person's activity levels," she says. "We'd usually write an eating plan after discussing the athlete's diet and identify sources of fat and look at alternatives. It's important that the metabolism stays high and there's a balance of nutrients."

Iron and calcium are especially important for female athletes. But disordered eating and misguided weight-loss strategies often mean female athletes suffer nutritional deficiencies, which will eventually affect performance.

In addition to gaining expert advice, learning to listen to your body is crucial for maintaining a healthy weight. For Emily, training at altitude, for instance, really taught her how to listen and adjust her diet accordingly.

"At training camps, like at altitude, where you increase your volume, you need to eat more than normal," says Emily. "I lost weight in this environment at first, and had to eat heaps to be able to cope with the training and not get sick."

According to Emily, maintaining a healthy weight which is necessary for good performance, requires commonsense.

"If you train hard, you can eat hard, of the right kind of foods," says Emily.

Injury, however, can potentially throw good intentions off kilter. Inevitably, all athletes will experience an injury at some stage of their sporting career. Michelle suggests an athlete enlist the assistance of a dietician to minimise weight gain during a time when energy requirements are changing.

"When they're injured, an athlete really needs to get advice because of their changing energy needs," she says. "If excess kilojoules are being converted to fat then an athlete may put on weight and it will take them longer to regain fitness."

If a runner is injured, it's particularly difficult because even if they're able to cross-train, few activities burn as many kilojoules as running. Like most athletes, Jenny says enforced rest through injury can be an emotional time for her.

"It [being injured] makes me irritable and makes me stress about what I am going to do not to put on weight. You also feel like you're falling behind in training and if you put on weight it only makes it harder to get back into shape," Jenny says.

Weight management: all year-round

Weight management, says Paul Penna, should be looked at holistically. He says athletes should aim to maintain a healthy weight all year-round so there's no pressure to gain or lose weight and the emphasis should be on eating for a lifetime.

"I'd suggest having a plan for 52 weeks of the year, not a crash course before a race," he says. He also encourages athletes to be adaptable.

"Don't wait until the end of summer to decide what your plan is for winter. You've got to take into account that the body changes according to weather and different training, so your plan needs to be flexible, too."

Having a flexible plan, says Jenny, has changed her perception about what a healthy weight is and has impacted favourably on her performances. "I am now more focused on a more muscular physique even though that means I'll be a bit heavier. It makes you look stronger and healthier," says Jenny.

Strength, comments Emily, is vital to good performance and is often overlooked by many athletes who waste valuable energy worrying about what the scales say.

Ultimately, trial and error will determine what a healthy weight is for you. As mentioned earlier, the dangers of being underweight include loss of a regular menstrual cycle with repercussions such as loss of bone density, fatigue and poor overall health. The risks associated with carrying excess weight include increased energy requirements, which will impact unfavourably on endurance and speed.

Just like an erratic training program is likely to lead to erratic performances, significant fluctuations in weight are likely to have a negative impact, too. If you feel your weight needs some adjustment, Paul has this recommendation: "If you want to change, it's about taking small steps to get there"

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